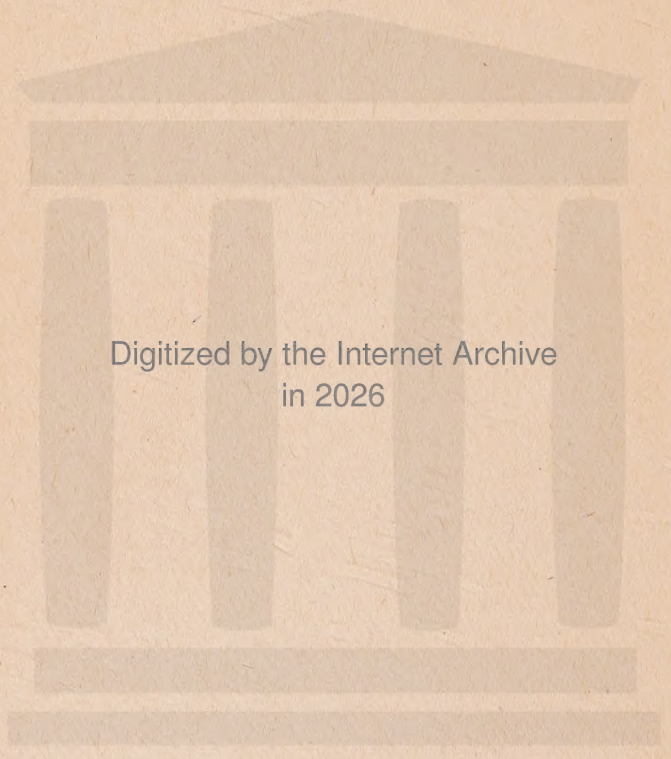
OUTDOOR GIRLS

On a Canoe Trip

LAURA LEE HOPE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The Outdoor Girls on a Canoe Trip

or

The Secret of the Brown Mill

By

LAURA LEE HOPE

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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS ON A CANOE TRIP

CHAPTER I

AN INTERESTING MAP

"STELLA should have been here before this."

Irene Moore paced the room restlessly, then went to the window to look up the street.

"She said she would be here by two-thirty, and here it is almost half-past three," she continued.

"Where was she going?" asked Carolyn Cooper, the pretty, fair haired girl who was curled up comfortably in a corner of the couch.

"Shopping," said Irene, her pert, snub nose still pressed to the window screen.

Carolyn chuckled.

"Then we needn't expect her home until dinner time. When a girl goes shopping——"

"But this is a special meeting of the Outdoor Girls," cried Lota Bronson in an outraged voice. "Stella herself called it, and now she has gone downtown on a shopping trip! What on earth did she have to choose to-day for?"

"You ask her," suggested Meg Bronson, Lota's twin.

"Keep cool, every one!"

Irene turned from her post at the window, helped herself to a bonbon from a box of them on the living-room table, and perched on an arm of Meg's chair.

"Stella will be here any minute now. In the meantime, I don't see why we can't talk about plans for our canoe trip; sort of decide on the route we want to take and all and submit the result of our earnest cogitations to Stella when she gets here."

Instantly the meeting came to life. Carolyn uncurled herself and sat on the couch at attention. Meg and Lota Bronson acquiesced eagerly in Irene's suggestion.

"That's the talk! Why wait for Stella, if she must go shopping?"

"Have you drawn up the map yet, Irene?"

Irene nodded and shoved a hand into the pocket of her sweater.

"A rough one. Before we start, I'll copy it in pen and ink. Still, we can get some idea of our course."

Irene Moore spread a piece of rumpled paper out on the table.

The four girls bent over it eagerly.

There was a series of elongated circles, strongly resembling a string of sausages. These, it appeared, were lakes.

"You see," Irene elucidated eagerly, "we can start right here at the upper end of Rainbow Lake and go on to this other chain of smaller lakes without once having to make portage with our canoes."

"I don't see that," Carolyn objected. "I never knew Rainbow and Lake Ronson were connected."

"Neither did I until Betty told me about it," Irene confessed.

"Betty who?" asked Meg Bronson, absently, her eyes on the string of sausages.

Irene glared at her.

"Betty who? Why, there's only one Betty. You know that as well as I do! I was referring to Betty Nelson Washburn, the one and only, formerly the incomparable Little Captain of the Outdoor Girls."

Meg grinned.

"All right. I'm properly squelched. What more about this string of sau—I should say lakes?"

"You'd better," retorted Irene, twinkling. "Well, to proceed. Rainbow is connected with Lake Ronson by a body of water big enough for a motor boat to pass through. Of course our canoes will have no trouble whatever."

"That's luck," observed Lota Bronson. "No fun trying a portage with a couple of Baytown canoes loaded with duffel."

"You and Meg should have no trouble." Carolyn Cooper regarded the western-bred twins with mischievous amusement. "I bet you could balance a Baytown on top of your head for a mile or two and never turn a hair."

"Oh, you think so, do you?" retorted Lota good-naturedly. "Well, now, let me tell you, young woman, that if there's any balancing to be done, you will be in there, hauling your full share."

"There you go, wrangling about a difficulty that can't possibly crop up," cried Irene, exasperated. "Will you please show some sense?"

"How can they show what they haven't?" inquired Meg Bronson scathingly. "Now

what's the name of this next sausage—I should say lake?"

"It has the name written on it plainly enough," returned Irene Moore a bit coldly. "You can read for yourself."

"Yeh." agreed Meg, with imperturbable good nature. "School did that much for me. But I must say, I think you've got this word spelled wrong, Irene."

"Why?"

"Well, whoever heard of a body of water called Supper Lake?"

"We'll have to reach there in time for the evening meal," giggled Carolyn. "Oh, girls, this is going to be fun!"

"I hope so!" said Meg and Lota Bronson together.

The dubiety in their tones caused Irene and Carolyn to regard the Bronson twins with honest surprise.

"You haven't any doubts, have you?" Irene wanted to know.

Meg gulped once or twice, exchanged a glance with Lota, and blurted out:

"Look here, girls! Lota and I don't know a thing about canoes. To tell the truth, we're plumb scared to death of them. Now if this was a rowboat trip——"

Irene hooted derisively.

"Rowboats! Why, we'd never get where we want to go in a hundred years. Besides, Meg, a canoe is really much safer."

Meg shook her head doubtfully.

"Don't they have canoes out West?" asked Carolyn curiously.

"I've heard that Indians use them sometimes. And they're scary enough contraptions, let me tell you—just bits of birch bark that turn over if you look at them."

"But a Baytown is different," Carolyn pointed out. "It has a much flatter bottom. It is perfectly safe, really, Meg—provided you don't try to stand on the gun'ale. And they're ever so much more fun than a rowboat."

"But we don't know anything about paddling," Lota protested. "We don't know a paddle from a—from a—codfish."

"You'll learn," predicted Carolyn hopefully. "Now, let's on with the map."

"Well, from Supper Lake we go to Lake Casto and from Lake Casto on to Tonk Lake—that is, if we feel like going so far. We'll have covered considerable ground—or water—by that time and may be tired enough to turn back."

Irene Moore folded the map and stuffed

it back into her pocket. She looked at the girls expectantly.

"There's our itinerary," she said. "How do you like it?"

"Sounds marvelous to me," returned Carolyn. "Why can't we start to-morrow?"

"Ask Stella. She has a string of things a mile long we have to attend to before we can even think of starting. Ah, here she is!"

"Speaking of angels!" cried Carolyn, as Stella Sibley flung into the room, her arms full of packages.

"Where have you been?" cried Meg and Lota accusingly.

"Much better ask where I haven't been!" retorted Stella.

She flung the packages down in the center of the table, which happened to be hers, since the meeting was being held in her house, and stared angrily at her fellow Outdoor Girls.

"Well, what's the bad news?" asked Irene. "And why the angry, outraged stare?"

"You may well ask!" cried Stella, sputtering and red with wrath. "Believe me or not, girls, I never—I never was so insulted in my life!"

CHAPTER II

A LOLLIPOP

THIS curious outburst on the part of Stella Sibley, the leader of the Outdoor Girls, startled and amazed her friends.

"You look mad enough to bite nails," observed Irene Moore, with a nervous giggle. "Come, Stella, calm down and tell us about it."

"Wait a minute until I get my breath," gasped Stella. "I can't talk I'm so furious. Oh, that woman! Some one might get me a drink," she added hopefully.

Carolyn Cooper ran to get a glass of iced lemonade, while Lota Bronson pulled off Stella's tight-fitting hat and fanned her with it.

Irene Moore and Meg Bronson hovered solicitously about their leader.

Under their combined ministrations, Stella's anger soon cooled. She drank the iced lemonade gratefully and ran ruefully a hand through her rumpled locks.

"I suppose you think I'm mad, barging in

on you girls like this," she apologized. "But I've just had a most disagreeable experience and I—well, I had to let off steam some way."

"Suppose you tell us all about it and let off some more steam," Lota suggested soothingly.

"Well, it all happened on the way home," explained Stella. "I was sitting beside this big parade——"

"This what?" cried Meg.

"Well, it was only one woman really, but she was big enough and weighed enough to make a flock of them. I never saw so much fat on one person in my life, outside of a circus side-show."

"And this—er—paragon had the seat beside you?" asked Carolyn.

"She had the two seats beside me," corrected Stella vigorously, "if you know what I mean. And what's more, even that didn't satisfy her. She wanted mine, too!"

The listeners all giggled and Stella flashed them a reproachful look.

"Oh, I know it sounds funny when I tell it, but it was anything but funny for me at the time. This side-show freak bulged all

over me and, because the car was so crowded, I couldn't get away from her.

"I was all hot and tired from shopping and worried about being late to meet you girls. And then, as if I hadn't had just about all I could stand, she went and gave that awful child a lollipop."

"Child," cried Meg a little wildly. "You never said anything about a child."

"Oh, didn't I?" Stella's voice was ominously calm. "*What* an oversight. The boy was half as big as his mother—one of these awful kids out of the comic strip."

"Poor Stella!" giggled Irene. "In the words of the prophet, it never rains but it pours."

"You tell 'em!" remarked Stella, with slangy vehemence. "This one poured lollipops, literally. He sat over against me and dripped juice all over me. Look!" Pulling out her coat with a tragic gesture. "My new ensemble is completely ruined!"

"Stella, what a crime! It's all covered with red spots. Don't you suppose they will come out?"

"I doubt it. That miserable kid! I could have slain him!"

"Stella! And you a child lover, too!"

"No more! I'm cured!"

"But, Stella, what did you do? It isn't like you just to sit there and let a child drip lollipop juice all over you. You aren't usually backward about taking your own part."

"Take my own part! I ask you, what chance had I against that human truck and her hundred pound offspring? I was wedged in so tight between her and the man next to me that I could scarcely move. When I called her attention to the fact that her boy was using me for a napkin, she retorted that she couldn't be blamed if the car was crowded."

"Of all the nerve!"

"Yes, wasn't it? I tell you, I was fit to be tied. When I tried to push that awful infant away from me, she threatened to have me arrested for touching her darling child! Oh, I don't blame you for laughing. It would have been funny to me, too, if I hadn't been so hopping mad!"

"Did you find out who the woman was?" asked Lota.

"As it happened, I did. She got out with her awful infant at Halliday Place. You know the crowd always thins there, and while I was still examining the damage to my coat

Joyce Wraimer came over and sat down."

"She's the wife of the new cashier at the bank, isn't she?" asked Carolyn.

"Yes. She's nice, too. She had witnessed my run-in with the fat woman and said she had wanted to come to my aid, but couldn't because the car was packed so full."

"Did she know the woman's name?"

"And all about her," replied Stella. "She is a Mrs. Daisy Renton, a newcomer in town. Her husband is an inventor and reputed to be wealthy. For all that, I shouldn't have let her off so easy."

"But what could you have done?" protested Carolyn. "You can't very well arrest a person for having an unruly child."

"There ought to be a law against letting fat kids suck lollipops in crowded street cars," grumbled Stella. "As soon as we are old enough to vote, girls, we'll see about it."

Leaving Stella to nurse her resentment against the unpleasant Mrs. Renton, a few moments will be taken to tell new readers something about the Outdoor Girls and their activities up to the present time.

Nothing was too difficult for the vivacious

Outdoor Girls, and as their first effort, they embarked upon a camping and tramping trip which brought many interesting adventures.

There followed other good times at Wild Rose Lodge, at Cape Cod, and at Spring Hill Farm, a summer resort in the mountains. There had been a never-to-be-forgotten vacation spent at New Moon Ranch as the guests of Daniel Tower, the guardian and self-styled uncle of the Bronson twins, Meg and Lota.

The four original Outdoor Girls, Betty Nelson, Mollie Billette, Grace Ford, and Amy Blackford had, one by one, deserted their beloved club in favor of matrimony.

Betty Nelson, the loved "Little Captain" of the Outdoor Girls, was the first to go. She had married Allen Washburn, a young Deepdale lawyer with a steadily growing practice. Wedding bells again filled the air when Amy Blackford stepped to the altar with Will Ford, Grace Ford's brother. Not long afterward, Grace followed the example of her brother, pairing off with Frank Haley, another Deepdale boy.

However, as the older girls left the Outdoor Girls Club, new members stepped

into it; girls with the same love of outdoor life, who were ready and eager to uphold the traditions of the original Outdoor Girls not only in the letter but in the spirit.

Stella Sibley and Irene Moore were initiated first, to be followed not long afterward by Carolyn Cooper and the Bronson twins. When Mollie Billette, the last of the original Outdoor Girls to desert the club, married Roy Anderson, there were five Outdoor Girls to carry on the aims and ideals of the club, though none of the original number remained.

There were boys of course, since boys, though often in the way, are sometimes very useful—at parties and dances, for instance. Clem Field had been admitted to the magic circle chiefly because of his relationship to Stella Sibley, who was his cousin. Of all the Outdoor Girls, Clem had betrayed a preference for Mollie Billette. However, when Mollie put a definite end to all expectations by marrying Roy Anderson, Clem had transferred his attentions to pert, quick-tongued Irene.

Hal Duckworth, a fine, upstanding young fellow, was another lad on very friendly terms with the Outdoor Girls. Hal made no

secret of his admiration for pretty Carolyn Cooper.

The third of this interesting trio of young men was Dick Blossom, an awkward young giant who created a great deal of merriment for the young folks by his admiration of Meg and Lota Bronson and his inability to tell them apart.

The young folks lived in Deepdale, a thriving city of some twenty thousand inhabitants, situated on the banks of the Argono River. Some miles below Deepdale, the Argono emptied into Rainbow Lake.

So much for the young folks and their former activities. Now we return once more to Stella Sibley as she paces the living room and broods over the insulting treatment accorded her by the unpleasant Mrs. Renton.

"Don't let it worry you so much," Meg advised. "The incident is passed and, except for a lollipop-daubed coat, you are none the worse for it."

"How about the injury to my feelings?" asked Stella, with a half-twinkle in her eye.

"Oh, that!" giggled Irene. "My guess is that you will survive, Stella. Forget it. You will probably never see this Renton person again."

"For her sake," Stella hinted darkly, "I sincerely hope not."

"Oh, come on!" chuckled Carolyn. "You called this meeting so we could talk about this proposed canoe trip of ours. So far you haven't said a word about it."

"If you are going to be our leader you have got to manage things the same as Betty Nelson used to," put in Irene.

The cloud lifted from Stella's face and she smiled.

"Oh, I forgot!" she cried. "I have marvelous news for you!"

CHAPTER III

BETTY THE SECOND

"LET's have your good news, Stella," Meg Bronson demanded, excited by Stella Sibley's dramatic announcement.

"I'll give you three guesses," retorted the leader of the Outdoor Girls, her eyes dancing.

"Somebody has died and left you a million dollars," ventured Irene.

"I wish you were right, but you're not. Try again."

"Betty Nelson Washburn is coming to town!" guessed Carolyn Cooper.

In the act of opening her mouth Stella paused and stared at Carolyn reproachfully.

"You must have had a letter, too," she concluded.

Carolyn smiled and shook her head.

"Then how did you guess?"

"Stella, it's too easy. No other news on earth could make you look so happy. I know what you think of Betty."

"Well, my opinion is shared by quite a few

others," said Stella. "Anyway, she and Mollie are due in Deepdale to-morrow. They are going to visit Betty's mother for a few days and get in some shopping while they're here."

"Why didn't you tell us before?"

"I only had word myself this morning. Betty told me to spread the glad news. Now look here, girls. I thought it would be a good idea to hold another meeting of the club, either to-morrow or next day, in honor of Mollie and Betty."

"Hooray! I second the motion," cried Lota.

"All in favor say aye!"

"Aye!"

The response was so fervent that Irene's collie dog, Hesper, who had followed his mistress to the meeting, poked his head around the door and regarded them inquiringly. He barked faintly in protest against being disturbed, lay down on the mat inside the door, thumped the floor with his brush once or twice, and settled himself to sleep again.

"We'll make a party of it," Irene decided. "It's ages since we have seen any of the old crowd."

"How about Betty the Second?" asked Meg.

"Since Betty the First can't very well leave

her at home, I imagine she will be of the party," said Stella.

"She will be the party," said Carolyn Cooper, who adored babies—especially when they were four months old and had darling little round heads covered with fuzzy fair ringlets like Betty the Second. "Bless her little heart, did you ever in your life see such a ducky infant?"

"She looks exactly like Betty," maintained Meg.

"Which Betty will never admit," chuckled Irene. "She says the baby is the image of Allen."

The girls laughed, for they knew their Betty and her loyalty to her young lawyer husband. As Stella had once remarked, Betty saw Allen in everything nice.

Now there was a little Betty, or Betty the Second, as the Outdoor Girls had fondly named her. Never had there been—from the standpoint of Betty and Allen—such a wonderful baby. She had, still to quote them, all the virtues of both her parents and none of their defects; she was the sweetest, duckiest, sunniest infant that had ever been sent to complete the happiness of two doting parents, and if by a cruel stroke of fate anything should

happen to her, they, the parents, would never be able to survive.

In all these sentiments the Outdoor Girls heartily concurred, from which it may be seen that Betty the Second was on her way to becoming a thoroughly spoiled and pampered child. However, she was a darling and she did resemble Betty the First to an uncanny degree, so that must serve as their excuse.

"Then that's settled," said Stella. "I think I'd better call the meeting for day after to-morrow, since that will give Betty and Mollie a day to get settled and rested before we spring a party on them."

"Where shall we meet?" Carolyn wanted to know.

"Here, at two o'clock sharp. And be sure to be on time."

It was only after they had departed for their several homes that the Outdoor Girls remembered that they had said scarcely a word in reference to the proposed canoe trip, which had been the main object of the meeting.

However, they were willing to postpone the discussion for a day or two, since the summer was before them and a delay of a few days made little difference, one way or the other.

Betty the First, Mollie, and Betty the Second arrived according to their schedule at the Deepdale station the following day and were met in force by the Outdoor Girls and escorted to the Nelson home.

Betty and Mollie were as glad to see the Outdoor Girls as the Outdoor Girls were to see them and readily consented to attend the meeting at Stella's house the next day.

"We know it will be a lovely party, don't we, Bettykin?"

This remark, addressed to pink-cheeked Betty the Second, elicited adorable gurglings which her fond mother promptly interpreted as assent.

"You see, the baby is an Outdoor Girl by inheritance," laughed Betty the First. "How could she help but be interested in the things you do? Give three cheers, Bettykin, three cheers for the Outdoor Girls!" Whereupon one chubby fist of Betty the Second was swung over her head until the baby chuckled and gurgled with glee, delighted at what she evidently thought was some new kind of game.

It was only when Betty the First announced that Betty the Second must have a bottle and take a nap that the Outdoor Girls were able

to drag themselves away from the fascinating society of the two Bettys and Mollie. Like all the rest, Mollie Anderson was the abject, adoring slave of Betty the Second, declaring that she loved the baby as much as she could possibly love one of her own.

To which Betty replied with a hug for Mollie and a hug for Betty the Second.

"You just wait, Mollie Billette! You think you love Bettykin, and you do, of course. I can't honestly blame you. But just wait till you have a baby of your own, then you'll see the difference!"

"I'd never have one so lovely," said Mollie, pretending to bite the pink little ear of Betty the Second. "It wouldn't be my luck."

"If it were as homely as a mud fence," said Betty, with the new wisdom of Bettykin's mother, "you'd love it just the same!"

Plans for the party in honor of Betty Washburn and Mollie Anderson went forward. Stella instructed the cook in regard to refreshments.

"We'll have salad and ice cream—no, that won't do. We can't have ice cream with salad. I tell you what. Make some of those delicious little nut cakes, that's a dear—the kind you

made last Saturday for lunch. And a few cup cakes with almond icing would be nice."

"All right, Miss Stella. And what will you have to drink?"

"Lemonade—no, you'd better make iced coffee with whipped cream. Have the coffee well chilled, and you might bring on a bowl of chopped ice, just to make sure."

"That I will, Miss Stella. I'll have refreshments that will make your hair curl, so they will!"

Next day the Outdoor Girls arrived promptly at two o'clock. Stella greeted them with an approving, "On time for once!"

"I like that, after the way you kept us waiting the other day!"

"Where are the two Bettys and Mollie?" Irene wanted to know.

"Being held up by Betty the Second," Stella replied. "Betty the First called up a few minutes ago to say that she and Mollie would be a bit late. They had to wait until the baby finished her nap."

"Bettykin will have to get over all such idle habits," remarked Carolyn severely, "if she hopes to become an Outdoor Girl!"

"There's a car drawing up at the door," Meg reported from the window.

"Why," said Lota, joining her, "it's Hal Duckworth's car and he has Mollie and Betty and the baby with him."

"Also Dick Blossom," said Meg, and added dryly: "Hooray! The gang's all here!"

Hal explained that he and Dick had been on their way to the aviation field when they had overtaken Betty and Mollie and offered to give them a lift.

"If you are going to have refreshments," said Hal, with a look at Dick, "we'll hang around for a while."

CHAPTER IV

THE CANOE TRIP IS DISCUSSED

"This is a business meeting," said Stella Sibley, in response to Hal Duckworth's brazen proposition. "A business meeting of the Outdoor Girls."

"We don't mind, do we, Dick?" asked Hal, with another glance at his companion. "Even Outdoor Girls must eat. We'll stick around for a while."

"Oh, all right," said Stella, with a resigned shrug. "From experience, I know there's no getting rid of you, once you scent food. Come in, if you must."

"Thanks for the invitation," laughed Dick Blossom.

"Though we'll say nothing concerning the manner of it," added Hal Duckworth. "Hello, everybody? How's tricks?"

Carolyn Cooper sat in a corner of the couch, one foot curled under her, as was her habit. She wore a taffy-colored sport frock that made her hair look like corn silk. She made way for

Hal, who sat down beside her and began a low-toned conversation.

Stella, watching them, shook her head in exasperation.

"Carolyn is out, so far as a discussion of our canoe trip is concerned," she grumbled. "Why do the boys always have to interfere just when we have something important on hand?"

Dick, who overheard this remark, laughingly offered to drag Hal away in half an hour or so.

Stella, with a nod of her head toward the absorbed pair on the couch said gloomily:

"Try to do it!"

However, despite Carolyn's defection, the meeting was called to order and the business of the meeting brought to the attention of the Outdoor Girls.

Mollie Anderson and Betty Washburn were greatly interested in the proposed canoe trip, which was more than could be said for Betty the Second, who fell asleep at mention of it and was tucked into bed in Stella's room upstairs.

"She was absolutely bored to death," chuckled Irene Moore. "You will have to train

that child of yours, Betty, or she will never make a proper Outdoor Girl."

"She'll improve," said Bettykin's mother. "Give her time."

"And now about this canoe trip," suggested Mollie. "Let's see your map, Irene."

Irene brought out the string of sausages and it was exposed to a long and interested study on the part of the Outdoor Girls, old and new.

"You see, we expect to explore these lakes in the order named," explained Stella. With her finger she traced the proposed route. "We have the whole summer before us, so there need be no time limit set on the trip."

"When we feel like lingering, we shall linger, and for as long as we please," said Meg.

"I think it's a positively great idea," said Betty, at last. "The scenery all along the shores of the lakes is gorgeous and there are islands in all but Tonk Lake, which isn't as interesting as the others. I imagine you could spend any amount of time exploring those lakes without becoming tired of your bargain. Mollie, doesn't it make you a wee bit jealous?"

Young Mrs. Roy Anderson looked up from

the crude map and her eyes were soft with memories.

"I'd love it, Betty. Wouldn't I love it! What great fun we used to have!"

"We did," agreed Betty. "And we're lucky that we have such memories to look back upon. Now it's the other girls' turn to go adventuring. They can come back and tell us about it."

"Anyway," said Stella, thinking of Betty the Second, "you have your compensations."

"We have, indeed!" said Betty, with a contented smile.

It was not until the maid began to bring in the tea things that Hal evinced an interest in the vacation plans of the girls. Then he said casually:

"If you girls really decide to go on this canoe trip, it's possible you won't have to be deprived of my society during all that time."

"What a relief!" cried Stella sarcastically.

"I knew it would be," returned Hal, unperturbed. "Dick and I are thinking of taking a motorcycle trip up that way and we might meet you at one or two of the lakes in the chain."

"Meg and Lota will be glad to hear that," said Irene mischievously.

Dick Blossom flushed and Meg said in a cross voice:

"Don't be silly!"

During the consumption of chicken salad, the nut cakes, and the cup cakes with the almond icing, the Outdoor Girls, with the help of Betty and Mollie and the two boys, completed plans for the trip.

"We will start early Monday morning," Stella decided. "That will give us three days to do the necessary shopping and get our duffel ready and the canoes loaded."

She paused and looked appealingly at the two married Outdoor Girls.

"You can stay in town long enough to see us off, can't you?" she asked appealingly.

Betty and Mollie exchanged glances. Mollie folded her hands and said primly:

"We don't know. We'll have to ask our husbands."

"Imagine Mollie Billette ever asking any one's consent when she wants to do a thing!" scoffed Irene.

"I am no longer Mollie Billette. I am Mollie Anderson. Believe me," said the former leader of the Outdoor Girls, "there's a difference. You'll find it out some day."

Betty laughed and helped herself to another cake.

"We will stay over, Irene. We'll ask Roy and Allen, of course, just to be tactful, but they'll say yes. Being well trained husbands, they wouldn't dare say anything else. Listen!" She held up her hand after the manner of a traffic policeman and in the ensuing silence they heard a faint wail.

"Bettykins! Sorry to break up the party, girls, but my infant will not be denied. Coming, darling," they heard her call as she mounted the stairs toward the steadily swelling sound of lament. "Was mother's precious pet simply starving to death?"

The sound of an opening and closing door put a period to Betty's question. The baby's lament stopped as though by magic.

Below stairs, the Outdoor Girls exchanged smiling glances.

"Babies have all the luck," sighed Lota. "They make a few desolate noises and the whole world jumps to wait on them. Pretty soft!"

"We all had our turn at it, don't forget," laughed Mollie.

"And were too young to appreciate it."

"Have another cake and cheer up," Dick

suggested. "There's always the chance of second childhood, you know."

When the young folks were getting ready to go, Stella Sibley cornered Hal Duckworth and asked him point-blank:

"What's all this about the motorcycle trip, Hal? Is it pleasure or business?"

"Half and half," Hal replied. "I'm trying out a new job, Stella, as a traveling salesman. The job carries with it a small drawing account and a whopping big commission. If I'm any good at all at selling I should be able to make a pretty good income."

"If there's anything in the gift of gab," said Stella, smiling, "you should make a crackajack salesman, Hal. Good luck, anyway."

So the special meeting of the Outdoor Girls came to an end with the canoe trip actually decided upon and a definite date set for the start.

The next day Irene Moore and Stella Sibley set out for the shopping district to purchase the necessary equipment. They were in a high state of elation, for that very morning Mr. Sibley had handed Stella a check large enough to cover the cost of two brand-new Baytown canoes and whatever odds and ends of equipment they might need.

As they threaded their way through the main floor of the department store toward the elevators, Stella paused at the jewelry counter to admire some strings of colored beads that hung on a rack.

"I'd love some, but since I can't very well use them on a canoe trip, I might as well practice being economical."

As the two girls moved away from the counter, a woman who had been standing near them cried out in consternation:

"My purse is gone! Stop thief! Stop that girl! She took it!"

CHAPTER V

THE ACCUSATION

Stella Sibley and Irene Moore whirled about.

A woman charged down upon them, a woman weighted down with fat, a woman who would have graced the freak side-show of any circus.

Stella gasped and her face went red with anger.

"It's that awful Mrs. Renton, the one whose angel child ruined my coat!"

The fat woman continued to shriek accusations, while a crowd gathered about her and several store officials came running.

"That girl stole my purse! She was standing right next to me at the counter. She must have taken it!"

"Why, Stella, the woman is pointing directly at you!" cried Irene, horrified.

Stella Sibley stiffened as she made the astounding discovery that Mrs. Renton's accusation was directed toward herself. In spite

of her indignation, she felt chilled and oddly frightened. It was not pleasant to be accused of theft, even though she knew the accusation was absurd.

A crowd quickly formed about her and Irene and the irate Mrs. Renton. The floor-manager forced his way through, followed by a stout man in a dark-blue suit, who proved to be a store detective.

Mrs. Renton pointed a finger at Stella and turned in authoritative appeal to the two men.

"She took it! I demand that she be searched."

"Took what, madam?" asked the floor-manager respectfully, while the detective turned a piercing glance upon Stella.

"My purse, of course! It was a change purse, but I had several bills of large denominations rolled up in it. Now it is gone!"

"What makes you think this young lady is responsible for its disappearance?" the floor-manager questioned. His glance toward Stella was half apologetic.

"Think!" returned the woman irately. "I know! She was standing next to me at the counter. No one else could have taken it!"

"That's absolute nonsense!" cried Irene,

unable longer to restrain her Celtic temper.

The floor-manager was in a quandary. Mrs. Daisy Renton was a liberal patron of the store. She had money to spend, and spent it. He did not care to run the risk of offending her.

On the other hand, Stella's appearance predisposed her in his favor. She did not look like the sort of young person who would try to make a living by robbing fat women of their change purses. She, too, was known to him, and her patronage and that of her father, in his own words, "was not to be sneezed at."

While the floor-manager hesitated the detective stepped forward. He had not once shifted his gaze from Stella's pale face.

"You heard this lady's charge," he said, with a jerk of a thumb toward Mrs. Daisy Renton. "What have you to say in reply to it?"

"Just what my friend has said," returned Stella steadily. "Such a charge is nonsense. I never saw this woman's coin purse. You may search me if you like—but afterwards my father will have a word or two to say."

This threat was lost on neither the floor-manager nor the house detective. While they hesitated, exchanging doubtful glances, they

were suddenly startled by the sound of a scornful laugh.

Irene stepped forward, flicked aside a large taffeta bow that adorned the ample waist of the fat woman, and disclosed a small, shining object to the astonished gaze of the onlookers.

"There's your coin purse," said the girl contemptuously. "You must have dropped it and it caught in your sash. I'd advise you to be more careful in the future about accusing innocent persons of theft."

Deftly, Irene flicked the purse loose from its temporary resting place and handed it to Mrs. Daisy Renton.

The woman gasped, clutched the purse frantically in her beringed fingers, and, without a word either of thanks or apology, turned and waddled away through the crowd.

Stella stared after her for a moment, face red, lips angrily compressed.

"What a terrible woman!" she murmured. Then, heedless of the apologies of the floor-manager and the detective, she caught Irene's arm and hurried her through the crowd. "Let's get out of this. I never was so humiliated in my life!"

Irene was inclined to laugh the incident off

as being too ridiculous to worry about, but Stella was of a different temper.

"That's twice now that awful Renton woman has threatened to have me arrested. Think of her daring to call me a thief!"

"I know it's awful, but why worry about it? The woman's a fool."

"Fools can do a lot of damage to your reputation, once they get started. Wouldn't Dad be furious if he knew?"

"Don't tell him. That's the best way to avoid trouble. And now, how about those canoes? They're on the third floor, aren't they?"

In the interest of picking out the canoes, the duffel bags and camp equipment, Stella almost forgot her unpleasant encounter with Mrs. Renton. Almost, but not quite, for in her heart was a growing desire to humiliate this impudent woman as she, Stella, had been humiliated, to wring from the woman an admission that she had been in the wrong.

"I'll make Mrs. Daisy Renton apologize to me," thought Stella, "if it's the last thing I do."

Little did Stella Sibley dream of the strange circumstances under which she was to meet Mrs. Daisy Renton again.

The following week-end was so filled with the interest and excitement of preparing for the canoe trip that the matter of Mrs. Daisy Renton grew faint in Stella's memory and finally slipped from it altogether.

"What shall we name the two canoes?" Carolyn Cooper wanted to know. "They will have to be named."

"Since canoes are famed for the tricks they play on unsuspecting mortals," said Meg dryly, "I think we'd better name one of them the *Puck*."

"Great!" cried Irene. "What a perfectly perfect name for a canoe! And we'll let you ride in the *Puck,* just to see if it deserves the name."

"Never mind," said Stella soothingly, "we'll be right behind you."

"Whoopee!" cried Carolyn. "There's the name for the second canoe!"

Her companion stared at her.

"The *Nevermind,*" Carolyn explained. "Could anything be more perfect?"

"It's a go," chuckled Lota. "The *Puck* and the *Nevermind!* Girls, we're inspired to-day."

So the names of the canoes were decided upon and the next day Hal Duckworth and

Dick Blossom painted the names in gold lettering on the stern of each craft.

Lists were made of the provisions they would need for the trip. These lists were checked and revised every few minutes, the girls being unable to agree upon the amount of food necessary to insure their comfort during a protracted and indefinite trip, such as that upon which they were to embark.

In desperation Stella finally seized the lists and pared them to the bone, declaring that they would take sufficient provisions to last them for a day or two, no more.

"We'll be able to restock on the way. And if we take our fishing rods we can catch enough fish to provide us food for several meals."

Irene Moore clapped her hands.

"There speaks the voice of wisdom. It will be lots more like gypsying that way. Besides, we won't want to overload the canoes. In a storm that might be unhealthy."

Monday dawned in a drizzle of rain. The Outdoor Girls were disappointed at this manifestation of unfriendliness on the part of the weather, but refused to postpone their trip.

"We can wear slickers and cover the stuff with tarpaulins," Carolyn said optimistically.

"Right enough," returned Meg. "We shall probably be rained on more than once during the trip. It seems silly to insist on clear weather for the start."

Bright and early, the Outdoor Girls bade farewell to their families and, having promised many things that they genuinely meant to remember but would probably forget the moment they turned the first bend in the river, proceeded to the dock.

The provisions they carried in large hampers which Hal Duckworth and Dick Blossom had promised to take home for them after the contents had been safely packed aboard the canoes.

Betty and Mollie went to the dock with the canoeists, though Betty the Second remained in the custody of her doting grandmother.

"If the weather had been nicer, my precious child would have been here to send you off with three goos and a gurgle," Betty the First explained. "As it was, she sent her love and asked to be remembered to you. Oh, girls, what lovely canoes!"

"Aren't they?" agreed Stella, with pardonable pride. "And we've every last thing we need in the line of equipment. Look here!"

Whereupon the new Outdoor Girls dis-

played to the old Outdoor Girls all their recently acquired possessions, including two new fishing rods and a can of worms.

"We got the boys to dig us up some live bait," Lota explained. "When one of these wrigglers goes on the hook, we should catch fish."

"You should, but will you?" jeered Dick.

"We will. What's more, we have," said Meg. "And without any male assistance, either. Give me a hand with this canned stuff, will you, Lota? There's a dear—goodness, one slipped," as a can of beans fell into the water with a neat splash.

"A good meal for the fish," ejaculated Irene.

"Provided they have a can opener," chuckled Mollie.

The provisions fitted easily into one of the duffel bags. The other carried extra clothing for the canoeists besides various necessary odds and ends of camp equipment. Both bags, in accordance with Stella's directions, were placed in the *Nevermind,* leaving the *Puck* free of impedimenta.

Satisfied that everything was in readiness for the start, the leader of the Outdoor Girls assumed command.

"Carolyn, you will paddle stern in the *Puck*. Take Meg and Lota in with you and initiate them into the mysteries of paddling. I don't care which one of them paddles bow, only please don't let her drop the paddle overboard."

"Then you and I are going to take charge of the duffel," said Irene.

Stella nodded.

"The weight in both canoes will be just about even, which makes a fair division of labor. All right now? Everybody ready?"

There was a general assent. The *Puck* was brought alongside the dock and steadied by Hal and Dick while the girls climbed aboard.

"Now be careful," urged Carolyn, as Meg Bronson eyed the unstable craft uncertainly and put out a tentative foot. "Step square in the center of it and take care not to lose your balance."

Meg stepped, shrieked, and clutched wildly at Dick Blossom.

"Watch out! Now you've done it!"

CHAPTER VI

ALMOST UPSET

MEG BRONSON'S foot had slipped. For a few seconds she danced wildly about in the canoe, shouting for help, her arms whirling in a nearly vain effort to keep her balance.

Hal Duckworth held on to the teetering canoe while Dick Blossom reached for Meg.

In her wild gyrations she eluded him, and he was put to it to retain his own balance on the slippery edge of the dock.

He managed it, however, grabbed Meg after several fruitless efforts, and drew her to safety.

The girl gasped and clung to him and glared at the canoe as though it had suddenly changed into a rattlesnake.

Her expression sent the startled girls into gales of laughter.

"All right, laugh!" cried Meg, in a temper. "I vow I'll never get into one of those awful things again so long as I live. Good-by, I'm going home!"

Stifling her laughter, Stella called her back:

"Don't be an idiot, Meg! You'll have better luck next time."

"There's going to be no next time," declared Meg morosely.

However, she permitted herself to be led back to the canoe and, with both Dick and Hal to steady her, managed to reach the bow seat without further mishap.

She picked up the paddle gingerly and was startled into almost dropping it into the water by a sharp command from Carolyn.

"Leave that paddle alone! Don't touch it, please, Meg, until we get further away from the dock. Otherwise we'll bump and rub off all our shiny new paint. Just sit still, there's a dear, and enjoy the scenery."

Meg subsided with a grumble to the effect that she didn't know anything about paddles, anyway, and what was more, she didn't want to.

The onlookers were intent with interest when Lota essayed to enter the canoe.

However, having seen her twin safely landed, Lota had lost some of her awe of this strange craft. She was careful to step only in the center of it and was lowered to her place amid cheers from the spectators.

It may be mentioned here that all of the Outdoor Girls were excellent swimmers. Had it been otherwise it is doubtful if the older folks would have permitted them to undertake such a hazardous canoe trip.

"All set!" said Carolyn cheerfully, having seen Lota settled.

Scorning Hal's assistance, she stepped lightly into the canoe, shifting her weight to accommodate the teetering of the craft, slipped into her seat, and lifted the paddle.

It was a shiny new paddle and a joy to handle. Carolyn shifted it appreciatively, then raised it in a gesture of salute.

"What ho, the crew!" she cried in what she hoped was a nautical tone of voice. "Lay to and heave the anchor! 'By, everybody! See you again!"

"And how!" returned Hal, with slangy emphasis.

The shiny new paddle clove the water gently. Carolyn leant her weight upon it and the canoe moved easily away from the dock.

Carolyn thrilled to the instant response of the light craft to her touch on the paddle. A perfect example of all that is best in the art of craftsmanship, built for both speed and

endurance, the canoe responded to her will in a way that was almost uncanny.

As she floated out into the open water, a glance over her shoulder told her that Irene and Stella had already manned the second canoe and were about to push off from shore.

She waved her paddle to them and Stella waved back.

"Okay with us!" shouted Stella. "Make for the lake. You may set the pace, if you like."

"It's apt to be a pretty slow one," warned Carolyn. "I'll have to give my crew a few lessons before we can hope to work up any speed."

"All right," shouted Stella. "But don't let Meg drop the paddle overboard!"

Meg twisted about in her seat and the canoe dipped to starboard.

"Hold tight," warned Carolyn. "Easy on the sharp turn, Meg!"

Meg made a gesture of grabbing at her hair and Lota giggled.

"You'll have to take your hat off first, twin," she said.

Meg groaned.

"Are you allowed to breathe in this canoe?" she inquired with a deadly calm.

"If you do it carefully," laughed Carolyn.

"Now, Meg, you are about to have your first lesson. Take hold of that paddle."

"Not on your life," returned Meg. "I wouldn't touch it with a forty-foot pole!"

"Your hand will do," suggested Carolyn, and Lota hooted joyfully.

Slowly and carefully Meg twisted about in her seat and regarded her twin with a caustic eye.

"Will you keep out of this, or shall I have to——"

"What?" taunted Lota. "What will you do to me?"

"Splash you with half the water of——"

"Now listen!" Carolyn interrupted hastily. "Don't start getting funny with that paddle. If you use it, Meg, it will be for the purpose it was made for. Don't mind Lota. Her turn will come later."

This fact was so comfortingly obvious that Meg returned to her own problem with some suggestion of cheerfulness.

She picked up the paddle gingerly, eying it with suspicion.

"Now if you were an oar," she said, "I'd know well enough what to do with you. As it is——"

"You merely grasp it high up with your

right hand and lower down with your left——"

"That isn't the way you're doing it," interrupted Meg, having assured herself of this fact by another cautious twist and a glance over her shoulder.

"I know it isn't," Carolyn explained patiently. "But I'm paddling starboard and you're paddling port, which makes a difference."

"Why can't I paddle starboard too?" persisted Meg.

"Because we have to paddle opposite sides."

"Why?"

Caroyln's patience deserted her.

"You do as you're told!" she cried.

"Oh, all right," returned Meg, in the same tone.

The paddle struck the water with a resounding splash.

"Help!" shrieked Lota. "I'm drowned!"

CHAPTER VII

AMUSEMENT ABOARD

THE impact of the paddle with the water tore the paddle from Meg Bronson's fingers. As it whirled through the air, Carolyn howled:

"Grab that paddle!"

Meg tried and missed, nearly precipitating herself headfirst into the water.

Lota lurched against the side of the canoe and succeeded in gripping the slippery paddle before it disappeared altogether beneath the surface.

Lota's wild lunge tipped the canoe perilously. Carolyn flung herself to starboard just in time to prevent a complete upset. The boat shipped water heavily, however, and Lota plumped down in a pool of it.

"Jumping colts, I'm all wet!"

"Don't drop that paddle," reiterated Carolyn. She spoke wearily, as one who has a burden almost heavier than he can bear. "If you drop it we'll have to go back to Deepdale

and stay there. Now, for goodness sake, be careful!"

"I thought you said Stella was carrying two extra paddles," observed Meg.

"Well, so she is. But they are for emergencies."

"If this isn't an emergency, I'd like to know what would be! All right, give me the paddle and I'll try again."

There was a soft splash in the water and Stella Sibley and Irene Moore came abreast of them.

Irene shipped her paddle and grinned at them. With a few experienced strokes Stella brought the canoes together.

"What seems to be the trouble?" she asked.

"Meg's trying to upset us," complained Lota. "She has already shipped half the water of the river. I'm sitting in it."

"You might bail out, if it isn't too much trouble," Carolyn suggested scathingly. "There's a sponge right beside you."

Lota took up the sponge and giggled.

"Oh, is that what it's for? Why didn't you tell me?"

"What did you think it was? Part of our bath equipment? Listen, Stella," Carolyn turned appealingly to her superior in com-

mand, "you have handed me the two dumbest Doras in captivity. They don't know anything!"

"That's your problem," Stella told her hardheartedly. "You took on the job. Now you've got to see it through to the finish."

"The finish of me, you mean! All right, I can die but once. That should be some comfort."

"Cats have nine lives," remarked Meg dryly.

Lota giggled.

"That's one on you, Carol. Come on, girls. Kiss and make up. At this rate we seem to be getting nowhere with a great deal of rapidity. Besides, it's cold sitting in this puddle."

"It will be still colder later on," Carolyn prophesied grimly. "I'd suggest you get busy with that sponge."

"How about a little exercise with the paddle," Stella suggested. "Give Meg a chance, Carol. A few more strokes will show her the hang of it."

"A few more of her strokes will give me heart failure," said Carolyn plaintively. "Well, come on, Meg, let's try again. And please don't slap the water with the back of your paddle. It just isn't being done."

"Oh, all right!" Meg gripped the paddle with grim determination. "I'll get the best of this thing or bust."

"All right, only don't *bust* the paddle. Come on now—long, easy strokes. Meg! what *are* you doing?"

Meg lifted the paddle and shot an injured look over her shoulder.

"What's the matter? Wasn't that right?"

"Perfectly—except that you were paddling backwards!" In spite of her exasperation, Carolyn joined in the laugh at Meg's expense. "To go forward, you have to push the water away from you. Don't you know that?"

"Well, in rowing—" Meg began doggedly.

"This isn't rowing, darling, it's paddling! Listen, Meg, if you don't stop arguing with me——"

"Oh, all right! Let's try again."

This time, with the help of Carolyn's wearied instruction, Meg managed a fairly creditable performance.

"That's better. Don't sink your paddle too far——"

"If I don't it catches on the surface with a beautiful splash."

"Don't I know it!" said Lota, wiping spray from her face.

"There's a trick in striking the water," Carolyn explained. "You'll get the hang of it after a while. Practice does it. Now then —one, two—one, two—— Good! Now you're getting it!"

It was not long before Meg became enchanted with her new accomplishment. She had begun to "get the hang of it."

Now it was dip-and-push, dip-and-push, dip-and-push, with an easy rhythm that delighted Meg Bronson. The sweetly fashioned craft rode the water like an eggshell. There was almost no resistance to the push of the paddles. As Meg bent her back to the task, the canoe sped through the water with a speed that soon brought them to Rainbow Lake.

"It's absolutely swell," called the girl from the Middle West. "I could go on like this all day without tiring."

"You will feel sore-muscled later on," warned Carolyn. "Paddling is work if you do much of it. Take life easy, Meg. We've all day to get to the lower lake."

"I'll change places with Meg whenever you say, Carolyn," Lota suggested.

"We'll have no change of places here in the middle of the lake," said Carolyn. "We shall have to stop for lunch pretty soon, and

afterwards you may take your turn at the paddle, Lo."

A short time later Stella and Irene swept up beside the *Puck* and inquired what all the speed was for.

"We're back-weary trying to keep up with you," Irene complained. "What is this, anyway, a race?"

"Just say the word and we'll give you one," proposed Meg, who had become greatly daring.

Stella swiftly interposed.

"I race no one until I have had some lunch. Yonder is a tempting cove. What say we put into it and break out the lunch?"

The suggestion met with enthusiastic acceptance, and without further argument the two canoes turned covewards.

Rainbow Lake was endowed with a wealth of beautiful scenery. Its shoreline was richly indented and picturesque, providing numerous miniature bays, coves, and inlets which were all well known to the boys and girls of Deepdale. A profusion of small, heavily wooded islands lent an air of mystery to the natural beauty of the lake.

As the *Puck* and the *Nevermind* headed toward the cove mentioned by Stella Sibley,

the sun, which had been hiding behind the clouds all morning, came out in sudden glory, transforming the landscape to molten gold.

The girls cried out in delight and turned their faces upward to the welcome warmth.

"We won't need our slickers any more," cried Meg.

"Leave them on until we land," Carolyn directed. "I'll have no standing up in this canoe! We've come near enough to disaster twice to-day."

The little cove wandered off from the main body of the lake, delving deeply into the wooded shore. Trees grew down close to the water line so that the girls had to duck their heads to pass beneath the hanging branches.

Stella found a landing place where the shore shelved gently. Toward this she turned the *Nevermind*.

Irene jumped ashore to make the craft fast. She screamed suddenly and stopped, as though frozen to the spot.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SNAKE

STELLA SIBLEY jumped to her feet to see what had startled Irene Moore and cried out in fright.

An amber-colored snake lay coiled among the small rocks near the water's edge not more than a foot from where Irene stood.

The reptile drew back its flattened ugly head, the forked tongue flashed wickedly.

"Stand still!" cried Stella warningly. "Don't move!"

But as she spoke, Irene slipped on the moss-covered rocks and took a stumbling step backward.

The vicious head of the snake shot forward.

Without conscious thought, Stella acted.

The wet paddle flashed in the air, came down upon the reptile's body. It caught the slimy creature squarely behind the head, pinning it to the earth.

The amber body writhed and struggled, the

forked tongue flashed like lightning over sharp and poison-filled fangs.

Stella was seized by a sudden deathly sickness.

"Kill it, somebody, quick!" she cried. "I can't—I can't hold the thing!"

Irene overcame the fascination the wretched creature held for her. She stooped and, gruntingly, dug a rock from its shallow bed of earth. This she poised for a moment above the hissing head of the snake, then let it fall.

Stella cried out as the stone struck her paddle and cracked it.

However, Irene's marksmanship had accomplished its purpose. The head of the reptile lay crushed beneath the rock. The amber body lashed wildly for a few seconds, then lay inert.

"Good shot," said Stella softly.

"Not so good as yours," Irene returned. "If your paddle had struck an inch to the left or an inch to the right, I shouldn't be standing so calmly here."

The other girls had beached the *Puck,* and now they came up to where Stella and Irene still stared at the twitching body of the snake.

"What's up?" they wanted to know.

Irene told them, praising Stella's quick wit and action until the latter was moved to protest.

"It was just luck—that I caught the snake right, that is. I had to do something quick, and I did it. I acted by instinct."

"Just goes to show what you could do if you really tried," remarked Lota, as she bent over the dead reptile. "Rather nice hide at that. Wish we could skin him. Make us a good pocketbook or pair of shoes, or something."

"It would take more than one snake skin to make a pair of shoes," said Carolyn. "Lota, if you touch that slimy thing I'll howl."

"Oh, all right," said Lota, as one humoring a child. "But I don't mind snakes. I'd just as soon pick one up as not alive, provided I could get hold of it right."

"Pull her away, some one. She gives me the shivers. Who has the lunch, anyway?" and Carolyn made for the *Nevermind*.

While the other girls "dug out" the lunch, Meg Bronson paused beside Stella, who was ruefully examining the damaged paddle.

"I thank my stars," said Meg, "that *I* didn't break it!"

Stella flashed her a look of understanding and laughed.

"Well, you may," she said. "Carolyn would never have let you forget it. Just the same," she added soberly, "I'm sorry this happened. We may find ourselves shy of paddles before we get back to Deepdale."

From the *Nevermind* the girls got out the lavish lunch that Stella's cook had provided for their first day in the wilds.

Thus armed, and having seen to it that the canoes were safely secured to trees on shore and could not drift away, the Outdoor Girls made their way into the woods in search of higher ground.

"If my memory doesn't fail me, there is a prodigious flat rock at the tip of that knoll yonder," said Irene. "We can use it for both table and chairs and so contrive to protect ourselves from the considerable damp dampness of the earth. What say you all?"

"If such a rock exists, lead on," directed Stella.

The sunlight sifting through the trees, the prospect of days, perhaps weeks, of such exhilarating freedom—the girls had put no definite limit to their trip—and last, the prospect of a delectable lunch to be eaten in ro-

mantic surroundings, all these things served to stimulate the already bounding spirits of the girls until they felt almost light-headed with happiness.

It required considerable searching to discover Irene's flat rock, the delay providing the occasion for much baiting and good-natured teasing of the latter.

However, the rock, once found, proved to be all Irene had claimed for it, being flat and broad and agreeably free from bumps and indentations, altogether an unsurpassable rock for their purposes.

The Outdoor Girls seated themselves, the lunch boxes in their midst, and eagerly examined the contents.

"Rolls," said Meg.

"And chicken, sliced."

"And frankfurters with mustard."

"Bully!" cried Lota. "A picnic isn't complete without frankfurters, though they're much better freshly cooked over a campfire."

"The cook didn't forget a thing," stated Stella approvingly. "Here are sweet pickles, girls, for those who want them—and another batch of nut cookies. She must have thought each one of us is twins, to have sent such a stack."

"We'll manage," said Carolyn complacently. "I've seen the Outdoor Girls at work before. Fall to, everybody."

It was a toothsome picnic lunch, and when the girls had finished, there wasn't much of it left to pack back in the duffel bag.

Like true woodsmen, the picnickers first cleared up the untidy evidences of their repast. Then the girls stretched out on the rock to enjoy that after-dinner sense of refreshment and well-being.

The fresh, damp smell of sodden earth, of rotting leaves and vegetation rose all about them and they drew in deep breaths of the beloved, woodsy fragrance. As Outdoor Girls, no other perfume could seem as sweet to them.

Carolyn Cooper sighed and stretched like a contented cat.

"All we need now is a little music to make the picture complete. Stella, Irene, I don't suppose you care to accommodate us?"

Stella Sibley rolled over on her face and laughed lazily.

"Hardly, after such a meal. Besides, how could we make music with nothing to make music on?"

"Hah! I take that as my cue. I will now produce my little surprise!"

At these words, uttered in a slightly melodramatic tone, several pairs of eyes turned lazily toward Meg Bronson.

The latter fished in the deep pockets of her slicker and drew forth five rectangular objects. With a gesture of triumph she spread them out one by one upon the rock.

"My word," said Carolyn, opening an eye, "what are they for?"

CHAPTER IX

MEG'S SURPRISE

MEG BRONSON was indignant. What is more, she felt that her indignation was justified.

"What are they for? Music, of course. You asked for it, didn't you?"

Irene Moore stared and giggled.

"Mouth organs. Five of them. One for each of us. And she calls it music!"

Stella chuckled lazily.

"The only thing to do is to slay Meg and throw those awful things in the lake."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!"

Offended, Meg regained possession of the harmonicas and was about to restore them to the pockets of the slicker whence they had come when Lota held out her hand.

"Let's have a look at one, Meg," she suggested. "We used to play these things right well when we were kids. Remember?"

"Sure. That's why I brought them along. Thought we might have some fun and de-

velop a little harmony. However, since my suggestion is received with scorn and ridicule——"

"Oh, snap out of it, Meg," retorted Stella good-naturedly. "If you and Lota really play the things, that's different. Proceed. Give us an exhibition."

Accordingly Meg and Lota went to work with a will on the tiny instruments. The sounds they produced at first were anything but melodious.

They persisted, however, in spite of good-natured jeers on the part of their audience, gradually regaining mastery of an old and all-but-forgotten trick.

They played lustily, beginning with the "Turtles' Serenade," swinging into the "Sailor's Hornpipe," and completing the recital with "Home, Sweet Home," in two parts.

"Whoever would have thought it!" cried Carolyn Cooper, regarding the twins with interest. "Why, you can really get music out of those silly things. Here, give me one. I want a go at it."

Stella and Irene must try their hand at the new accomplishment, also. Soon the woods echoed with wild and terrible sounds such as never before had desecrated its sylvan silence.

However, the birds and bees and other woodland denizens may have felt about it, it is a fact that the girls enjoyed themselves thoroughly, breaking off to shout with laughter at some particularly blatant discord or to applaud no less vociferously when one of them happened, by accident, to strike an harmonious chord.

"If we keep this up we'll soon have to change the name of our club," laughed Stella. "We'll call ourselves the Musical Marvels."

" 'The Unmusical Maniacs' would suit better," said Meg dryly. "Now listen, girls, this is the way you do it." Off they went again in a cascade of horrible sounds, broken by shouts of merriment.

They might have kept at it till sundown if Stella had not suddenly remembered that they were still a long way from the foot of Rainbow Lake, where they had planned to spend the night.

"We shall have many other chances to practice charming the birds and beasts," she reminded them. "Gather up your harmonicas and the lunch bag and let's be off."

The others made no objection, for they knew that wherever they went or whatever they did, there was bound to be fun.

They found the *Puck* and the *Nevermind* moored where they had left them.

The girls gladly doffed slickers and packed them away with the other duffel.

"Let's hope we shan't need these again until the journey's end," said Meg.

Stella shook her head and laughed.

"No such luck, I'm afraid. We shall probably meet plenty of rain before Deepdale sees us again. All aboard, girls. Are you ready?"

"Just a minute! Lota, you take the paddle now. It's Meg's turn to loaf."

Carolyn swung the *Puck* about and held her steady while Lota climbed aboard and settled herself in the bow.

Meg followed, complaining that just when she had "got the hang of the paddle" she was forced to relinquish it.

Her crew safely aboard, Carolyn gave the canoe a push, scrambled in herself and gripped the paddle.

"Don't try to help, Lota, until we get out in deeper water," she instructed. "I can manage this myself."

Skilfully, Carolyn Cooper guided her craft through the shallow waters of the cove and out into the main body of the lake.

Stella and Irene followed slowly in the

Nevermind, it having been agreed that the *Puck* should show the way until Lota and Meg became more expert with the paddles.

"All right, Lo," called Carolyn. "Have a try now. And don't——"

"Drop that paddle overboard," said Meg, stealing the words from her mouth.

Carolyn chuckled.

"I see you have learned your lesson," said she. "That's right, Lota. Pretty good!"

Lota had acquired several of the fine points of paddling while watching Meg's struggles. She knew, without being told, a great many things that poor Meg had had to learn through more or less bitter experience.

To be sure, she got her port and starboard badly mixed and several times struck the water in a very unsportsmanlike manner, repaying Meg in kind for the splashings that she herself had administered earlier in the day.

"Anyway, I haven't nearly upset the canoe," she said, in response to Meg's protests. "And I haven't lost the paddle overboard ——"

"Not yet," interrupted Carolyn grimly, as Lota sent a shower of spray into the boat. "However, there is still time for that."

Despite such discouraging prophecies, Lota Bronson's work improved steadily and it was not long before they were making good progress toward their objective, heading swiftly toward an island at the foot of Rainbow Lake.

Behind them, in the *Nevermind,* Irene Moore and Stella Sibley were discussing plans for the night.

"I don't know about staying at the Island Hotel," said Irene. "We look rather harum-scarum to mix with a summer crowd, Stella. I think we should have made plans to camp to-night."

"We have a good dress or two packed along with the other duffel," Stella reminded her. "It won't take us long to change and then we'll look as well as any of them. Speaking for myself, I'll be glad of a roof over my head to-night, a bed, and a good hot supper."

"There will probably be a dance in the Casino," Irene added, brightening. "We're almost bound to meet some one we know."

"If we don't, we can dance together," said Stella, shifting her paddle. "To port, Irene. My arm is tired."

Irene did not respond immediately. She

paused with her paddle arm raised and sat motionless, her gaze traveling up the lake.

"Paddle, crew!" Stella directed. "The *Puck* is making good time. We shall have to extend ourselves to keep up with it." She broke off and her eyes widened with sudden consternation. "Here comes the lake steamer," she cried. "And the *Puck* is headed in far too close!"

Irene nodded.

"That's what I've been noticing. I don't see how Carolyn can be so careless."

"Hurry!" cried Stella, and dug her paddle savagely into the water.

CHAPTER X

A THREATENED COLLISION

If Carolyn Cooper had not been absorbed in instructing and criticising Lota Bronson, she would undoubtedly have heard the whistle of the lake steamer before the craft rounded the bend in the lake.

As it was, the first warning she had of danger was the sight of the steamer looming like an ungainly monster, almost directly over her.

Lota shrieked and almost dropped the paddle.

In staccato tones Carolyn said:

"Don't let go that paddle. Sit still, Lota. And you, Meg. Leave this to me!"

At that moment Carolyn Cooper had need of all her coolness and resolution.

For the brief few seconds it looked as though the steamer and the tiny *Puck* would have a head-on collision, in which case not enough would have been left of the canoe and its occupants to tell the tragic story.

Carolyn set her teeth and paddled. She would not have thought it possible that she could put such strength into her stroke.

The *Puck* veered away from its towering adversary with a suddenness that laid its gunwale to the water's edge.

Meg and Lota sat still, fascinated by that towering shape, expecting each moment to feel the grinding clash of the collision.

Carolyn's desperate paddling avoided a collision by seconds but left the *Puck* still in desperate danger of suction from the wheel.

Carolyn strained against the paddle until her shoulders ached. Her back ached. Her breath came in laboring gasps.

The small craft was drawn irresistibly toward the larger one, as iron to a magnet. One pair of hands, of arms, one back, could not withstand the power of it.

"I can't, I can't!" sobbed Carolyn. "We'll be killed—horribly—all of us——" Then they bobbed close to the steamer, only to flash beneath the stern of it!

The big ship put on speed. The *Puck* was safe!

Not quite safe, for it still bobbed about like a cork in the wake of the heavy swell.

But Carolyn knew she could conquer that. They would ship some water, that was all.

She turned the *Puck* so that it would meet the swells head on. The light craft rode them like a thoroughbred, lifting her bow proudly to the challenge, swooping lightly into the trough of the waves.

"We're shipping water," said Lota in a husky voice. She laughed gamely. "Now it's Meg's turn with the sponge. There, we clipped that swell in the middle. I'm soaked."

"We are all lucky to be alive," gasped Carolyn. "I thought we were g-gone that time."

"You put up a good fight, Carol," said Meg, finding her voice and releasing her convulsive grip of the sides of the canoe. "It's a tight fix like that that shows us what we're made of. There'll never be any doubt of your courage after this."

Carolyn was too exhausted to respond to Meg's praise. Besides, the swells were still strong enough to require all her attention. She drove the canoe over toward the shore, determined never to be caught in any such jam again.

Stella and Irene had hovered just close enough to the scene of the threatened acci-

dent to be of use in case of need. They, too, had been caught in the swell from the steamer, but not so seriously as to inconvenience them.

Now Stella brought the *Nevermind* up behind the laboring *Puck*.

"What were you trying to do, shove the lake steamer off the road?" asked Stella.

"You sure gave us a scare that time, Carolyn," Irene added. "It looked to us as if the *Puck* would be cut in half."

Carolyn smiled wanly.

"It looked even worse to us," she admitted. "I'm tired out, girls. We haven't much further to go, have we?"

"About fifteen minutes easy paddling," answered Stella. "Take it slowly, though. We've plenty of time."

They paddled lazily around the bend in the lake while Meg used the sponge to bail out the *Puck*.

Carolyn gradually recovered her breath and the color came back to her face. She was exhausted, however, both mentally and physically and knew that it was lucky for her that the Outdoor Girls had nearly reached their destination.

Once about the bend of the lake, the island

with its pretentious summer hotel became plainly visible.

"Only a short pull now," thought Carolyn, cheered at the prospect of hot food and a comfortable bed.

There were two piers used by the patrons of the Island Hotel. On one of these was the boathouse, accompanied by the usual motley array of boats of all sizes and descriptions.

On the pier were three racks for canoes. Moored to the pier were several rowboats and two motorboats.

The other pier was equipped with a diving board and was devoted entirely to those guests of the hotel who preferred swimming to boating.

Naturally, it was to the first of these two piers that the Outdoor Girls paddled at the close of their first day on the water.

Several persons were on the pier, either having just come back from some boating expedition or preparing to put out in one of the miscellany of craft. Most of them were clad in bathing suits and they stood around in friendly groups exchanging jokes and experiences of the day.

All this familiarity made the Outdoor Girls

feel oddly lonesome and they were glad when the grizzled old boatman came forward to help them moor the *Puck* and the *Nevermind*.

As they scrambled to the pier, declining the assistance of the boatman, a young man detached himself from a laughing group and came toward them.

"Hello, girls!" he said.

CHAPTER XI

CLEM APPEARS

"CLEM FIELD!" cried Stella Sibley delightedly. "Are you staying here?"

"Only as long as you girls stay," answered Clem.

His words were for them all, but his eyes rested on Irene. The latter returned his look and smiled.

"I suppose you'll be telling us next," she said pertly, "that you came down here for the express purpose of meeting the Outdoor Girls."

"And if I did it would be the truth," retorted Clem, mimicking the slight suggestion of brogue in Irene's voice. He knew that there was no better way to tease her, or rouse the "Irish" in her.

"Do you girls want to go up to the house?" he asked, changing the subject. "Or will you go for a swim first? You can change in the boathouse," he added, "if you've brought your togs along."

"We want supper," said Carolyn. "I can't speak for the rest of the girls, but I'll feel like nothing human until I've had some food."

"Me, too," said Meg and Lota together.

Irene and Stella indicated by a smile and a nod that they were of the same opinion.

"All right. You go on up to the house while I jump into some clothes. I'll have your duffel taken up to the house. Aunt Jane's with me," Clem added, as the girls moved away.

Stella Sibley stopped dead and shot a glance back at her cousin.

"Aunt Jane! Did she bring her cross-word puzzle book with her?"

Clem laughed.

"I don't know. You might ask her," he suggested.

"If I mention cross-word puzzles to Aunt Jane Field, I give you leave to toss me off the deep end of the dock," retorted Stella feelingly.

As the girls ascended the steep path that led from the water's edge to the piazza of the hotel, they discussed this new development.

Mrs. Jane Field, an aunt of Clem's and by courtesy of Stella's, was an eccentric widow whose one hobby was an all-absorbing inter-

est in cross-word puzzles. Since the eccentric lady expected all with whom she came in contact to exhibit the same interest in her hobby as she herself felt, her society was often a trifle wearing.

Mrs. Jane Field had many good points, however, to compensate for her eccentricities, so that people liked her and endured with patience her frequent references to the hobby which absorbed practically all of her spare time.

"There's one thing about Aunt Jane," Stella had often said. "You never have to entertain her. Just hand her a cross-word puzzle and she's all set for the evening."

Such was the woman who came to meet the girls as they ascended the steps of the hotel piazza.

Mrs. Field was tall and spare. She had discarded her nose glasses for a pair of spectacles, and through these her gray eyes gleamed genially.

"Stella, my dear, I am glad to see you. Come here and kiss your aunt. This is Irene Moore, I believe, of whom my nephew Clem talks constantly—constantly." She gave Irene a measuring glance and that young lady flushed uncomfortably, the more so since Meg

and Lota were heard to giggle and Carolyn gave her a surreptitious dig in the ribs.

"And these—er—these are the other Outdoor Girls. I dare say I should know you, my dears; but I regret to say your faces are unfamiliar."

Stella Sibley dutifully made the introductions, Mrs. Field listening with an absent air.

"Ah, yes, Meg and Lota Browning——"

"Bronson, Aunt Jane," Stella corrected.

"I said Bronson, love," replied Aunt Jane with unruffled amiability. "And Carolyn Porter. What a pretty child you are. That hair is an asset, my dear. I do hope you appreciate it."

"Carolyn's name is Cooper, Aunt Jane," said Stella patiently. "She's a niece of Mr. Joe Cooper, you know, who lives in Deepdale."

"Ah, yes," said Mrs. Field absently. It was evident that she had quite lost interest in Carolyn. "It's a peculiar thing," she added, eying them hopefully. "I have seldom been bothered by such a trifle. I suppose it will come to me presently."

Four Outdoor Girls looked puzzled, the fifth, resigned.

"What do you mean, Aunt Jane?" Stella asked dutifully.

"It's a word of seven letters and it must end with *i o n*." Mrs. Jane Field peered at them eagerly through her smart spectacles. "I declare, I have thought of dozens of words ending with *i o n* but nothing seems quite to——"

"How about station?" asked Stella.

Aunt Jane pounced upon the suggestion.

"I believe that is the very one I need, my dear child! You will pardon me, I am sure, while I write it down."

Stella eagerly seized upon this to make good her escape.

"Come on, girls," she urged. "If we don't use this chance we may never get another!"

In the hotel lobby they accosted the clerk behind the desk.

The Outdoor Girls brought persuasion and smiles to bear upon him and were finally given two connecting rooms at the top of the house.

"It's all we have left," the clerk apologized. "We are over full for so early in the year and a good number of the people are transients like yourself. If you want really good

accommodations, you have to reserve rooms in advance."

Stella assured him that they were very well satisfied to have been able to engage rooms of any sort for the night.

Escorted to their new quarters by a boy who wore freckles like a badge across his nose, the girls flung themselves upon the immaculately sheeted beds and lay there prone for several delightful moments.

It was not until a hotel attendant arrived with their duffel bags that they made any move to wash and dress for the evening.

"I don't want to get up," groaned Carolyn. "I could sleep right here without moving until eight o'clock to-morrow morning."

"I thought you were hungry," countered Stella. "Don't you want any supper?"

"There's always a catch somewhere," grumbled Carolyn, as she eased her weary legs over the edge of the bed. "Of course I want my supper. I'm just plumb starving to death."

Hunger spurring them on, the Outdoor Girls washed and dressed hastily. They discarded the useful garments they had worn during the day and emerged like butterflies from the chrysalis in the pretty flowerlike

frocks they had brought for this and like occasions.

Stella wore a straightline, clinging silk frock of forget-me-not blue, the type best suited to her graceful height. Against the blue of the frock, the deep tan of Stella's neck and arms was noticeable. Many people would pause to look twice at Stella Sibley that evening and feel well rewarded for their trouble.

Meg and Lota—who seemed to derive a mischievous pleasure from making themselves look as much alike as possible—wore natty white silk sport frocks that came just to the bend of the knee and were attractive because of their simplicity. Meg and Lota Bronson would never be called beautiful. They were not even pretty in the accepted sense of the word. Yet there was about them a clean-cut naturalness, a bounding vitality, that most people found exceedingly attractive. They, like Stella, were as brown as gypsies and very proud of the fact.

Carolyn Cooper was pretty, so pretty that it was easy to pick her from a roomful of people as the loveliest girl in it. Probably her hair had a good deal to do with this impression, for it was as golden as the sun and could

be depended upon to curl, looking its prettiest in damp or rainy weather.

To-night Carolyn wore yellow and was so pretty that Irene Moore gave her an impulsive hug as she passed.

"We should call you Sunbeam, Carolyn. You look just like one."

"I'll feel more like one after I've had my supper," chuckled Carolyn. She caught a glimpse of Irene's piquant face as it flashed past hers in the mirror. Carolyn whirled about, staring at the dark-haired girl appraisingly.

"You are not so bad yourself, Irene Moore," she said slowly. "You look stunning, truly. Isn't that a new dress?"

"Sure, and it is," agreed Irene, whirling about in the charming, rose-colored frock. "Do you like me in it?"

"Much!" said Carolyn. She regarded her companion for a long, steady moment. Then a smile curved her lips and she turned back to the mirror. "So will Clem," she said.

The Outdoor Girls were met at the foot of the second flight of stairs by Mrs. Jane Field and her nephew. Clem smiled in appreciation of the change the girls had made in their appearance.

"You're late, but it's worth it," he said. "Nearly everybody has gone into the dining room, but I've reserved a table overlooking the lake, so it doesn't matter."

Clem was justly proud of the Outdoor Girls that evening. Many envious glances were thrown in the direction of his table, and toward the end of the meal several of his friends came over to be introduced.

There was an elderly and gallant soldier whom Clem introduced as Major Gude.

The girls did not care for him. However, it would have made small difference if they had, for the major turned out to be a cross-word puzzle enthusiast and was immediately affixed by Mrs. Jane Field.

Among those who besieged Clem's table were three young fellows from a neighboring college who set themselves out to be entertaining to the girls and succeeded to a marked degree.

After supper the entire party proceeded to the casino where a dance trio of two violins and piano was already tuning up.

The girls, bright-eyed, crowded to the door and were swept off, one by one, upon the floor.

Major Gude excused himself to Aunt Jane

and moved off with Meg clasped in his arms.

Still in the doorway with Clem, Irene giggled.

"Poor Meg. He will step all over her feet and she hates that. Do rescue her, Clem."

Clem shook his head.

"I see one of the boys headed in her direction. She'll be all right. As for me," he took Irene purposefully in his arms, "I'm going to dance with you."

CHAPTER XII

A MOONLIGHT TALK

Clem Field's intention to dance all evening exclusively with Irene Moore was no doubt a worthy one. However, he found many obstacles in the path of this ambition, including some half-dozen college youths who liked the color of Irene's frock, her pert way of talking, and her maddening attitude of being entirely indifferent to them and their attentions. As a matter of fact, this was not a pose, but the college youths were not supposed to know that.

The influx of boys and young men from the mainland formed a stag line at the door of the casino, a state of affairs unusual at any summer resort and one which accounted for the exceptionally good time enjoyed by the Outdoor Girls. In fact, every one seemed to be having a good time, with the possible exception of Mr. Clemmons Field.

Each time he cut in on her, Irene found

him increasingly grouchy and finally asked him why.

They were nearing the door, and through this Clem gently but firmly propelled her.

"Will you need a wrap?" he asked, as they stood on the porch of the casino.

"I might be able to tell if I knew where we were going," she told him pertly.

"Down to the water. We can go out on the water if you like."

Irene looked up eagerly.

"Oh, Clem, then you did bring the *Liberty?"* The *Liberty* was Clem Field's motorboat, upon which the Outdoor Girls had at times been honored guests.

Clem nodded.

"She's tied up to the dock. Like to take a spin?"

"No-o. We'd be away too long. The girls and your Aunt Jane would wonder."

Clem tried to change her mind, but was unsuccessful. She went down to the dock with him, though, and even went aboard the *Liberty,* "to get the familiar lay of it," she told him.

Afterwards they went out and sat on the pier, dangling their feet and talking of many things.

After a short silence, Irene said suddenly:

"What made you bring the *Liberty* up here, Clem?"

Clem smiled, his teeth flashing in the moonlight.

"It was the easiest way to bring myself and—I had to be here. Haven't seen you in a dog's age, Irene."

"Two whole weeks," teased the girl.

"Which is just two weeks too long."

There was an earnestness in Clem's voice which warned Irene that the subject should be changed.

"You had some other reason for bringing the *Liberty* up here. You never planned this surprise for the sake of giving us one night's entertainment, nice as it is. You know you didn't. 'Fess up, now. What's the big idea?"

Clem sighed and tossed a pebble into the water, where it fell with a tiny splash.

"Never try to fool a girl," he said dolefully. "They find you out every time."

Irene chuckled and Clem half turned, covering her hand with his as it rested on the dock.

"Irene, aren't you ever going to stop laughing at me? You know how I——"

Irene snatched her hand from his and scrambled to her feet.

"Please, Clem! Why do you have to spoil things?"

"Do I?"

"By being serious!" The cry was almost a wail. "I don't want to be serious!"

Irene was half running up the steep grade toward the casino. Clem kept pace wih her, bending to try to see her face.

"I don't want to be serious," she cried again.

"Not ever?" asked Clem. And again, as they neared the casino steps: "Never, Irene?"

The girl paused and looked up at him. Her glance was not as pert as usual. There was something almost frightened in it.

"Never's a long time, Clem," she said, and ran up the steps and into the brilliantly lighted room.

During the rest of the evening Irene Moore contrived not to be alone with Clemmons Field. When he protested, as he often did, she turned a teasing shoulder to him and laughed:

"You came to see all the Outdoor Girls. You said so yourself!"

The dance at the casino broke up late that night, with the result that the girls were not

abroad as early the following morning as they had hoped to be.

Stella mourned this fact at the breakfast table.

"We should have been headed down the lake two hours ago," she said. "I hoped to get into Lake Ronson to-day. Your parties will be the death of us yet, Clem Field."

"Why don't you stay on one day and start to-morrow?" Clem suggested.

"And have another party to-night," sniffed Stella. "No thanks, we'll get going as soon as we finish our grapefruit and coffee."

"Let me tow you down the lake," Clem suggested. "That's one reason I met you here," with a side glance at Irene. "Thought maybe you'd accept a tow and we'd all have some fun."

"I'm all for it," said Carolyn, remembering her unpleasant experience the day before. "Looks like easy picking to me."

"Too easy, perhaps," murmured Stella. "Still, Clem knows the channel better than we do. Very well," she looked up with a flashing smile, "we accept—with thanks, Clem. How soon do we start?"

"As soon as I can tear Aunt Jane away from Major Gude," laughed Clem. "They

got up at seven o'clock to work out a new cross-word puzzle the major found in the paper. They are out on the porch, working on it yet."

"Then," said Stella, with great firmness, "we will go out the back door!"

Half an hour later, Mrs. Field had been separated from her fellow puzzle fan, Major Gude, and hustled aboard the *Liberty*.

The duffel bags, with the addition of supplies from the hotel kitchen, were once more snugly packed aboard the *Nevermind*.

The two canoes, the *Puck* first, the *Nevermind* bringing up the tail of the procession, had been attached to the *Liberty* by means of two generous lengths of rope. In fact, everything was in readiness for the start.

The news of the departure of the *Liberty* and its trailers had spread like wildfire among those at the hotel, so when the Outdoor Girls gathered on the pier, they found a gay assemblage of young folks awaiting them.

"That fellow, Clem Field, has all the luck," complained one of the college lads.

"I aim to hang on to it," retorted Clem, as he cast loose the hawser of the *Liberty*.

"Want some passengers?" asked another lad of the girls in the *Nevermind*.

Irene wrinkled her nose and called back:

"We've already too much duffel!" which caused a shout of laughter at the expense of the impertinent one.

Aboard the *Liberty,* Clem started the engine and the motorboat moved slowly away from the dock.

There was a cheer as the canoes followed, gliding lightly in the wake of the larger craft.

The Outdoor Girls waved handkerchiefs as the boats slipped past the pier and its gay cargo.

"I hate to leave," sighed Meg. "We had such a marvelous time last night."

Looking up at the sky, Carolyn said suddenly:

"Girls, I believe it's going to rain!"

"It is raining," said Meg. She extended her hand and caught two large drops on the back of it. "Well, I guess that means break out our slickers."

CHAPTER XIII

FUN IN A STORM

MEG BRONSON turned about in her seat and the *Puck* tilted precariously.

Carolyn Cooper called a sharp warning. "Please be careful, Meg. I can see you aim to upset us yet."

"Jumping colts! I don't dare breathe. How are we going to get our slickers on if we can't move about?"

"Our slickers are with the duffel in the *Nevermind*," said Carolyn. "I imagine, Meg, my dear, that we are going to get wet. We may even get very wet before we're through."

"Well, if you can stand it, I'm sure I can," said Meg. "Though if it rains very hard, we'll have to get busy with the bailer."

Lota giggled.

"It's all right with me. If it rains hard enough we shan't have to take a bath to-night."

As she spoke, lightning streaked across the sky, followed by a distant rumble of thunder.

"Clem is slowing up," Carolyn observed. "Maybe he wants us to come aboard."

That seemed to be Clem's intention. He made a megaphone of his hands and shouted to them.

"Ahoy there, aboard the *Puck* and the *Nevermind!* Bad storm coming up. *Liberty* at your disposal."

Carolyn Cooper looked behind to where Stella and Irene tagged the procession. Those in the *Puck* were surprised and rather disappointed to hear Stella shout back:

"Okay. Coming aboard!"

The towlines were cast loose, the *Liberty* came to a full stop, and a few moments later the *Puck* and the *Nevermind* ranged themselves beside the larger craft. The Outdoor Girls swarmed aboard, like pirates boarding a merchantman.

The Bronson twins and Carolyn turned inquiringly to their leader.

"It isn't like you to run from a storm, Stella," Carolyn reproached her. "What's up?"

"An idea," laughed Stella. "We brought the bathing suits with us. If Aunt Jane has no objection to our changing in her cabin,

we'll soon be garbed as befits the weather. Then let her rain. Who cares?"

In their adventurous frame of mind the other Outdoor Girls applauded the notion.

"Show us the way to the cabin," cried Lota. "That's all we have to know."

"Wait a minute," cried Aunt Jane, as they turned to dart below.

The eccentric lady was seated in one of the comfortable deck chairs, frowning happily over a cross-word puzzle. Engrossed in her hobby, she seemed totally unaware that a storm was pending. If the lightning had played in dazzling bolts all about the shining railing of the boat, she probably would not have given it a second glance.

In the act of flight, her four followers paused and sent frantic distress signals Stellawards.

That young lady shook her head at them and said, with admirable patience:

"What is it, Aunt Jane, dear?"

"The most provoking thing! I have it all worked out really except here in the right-hand corner. This simply will not come out right!"

"She wants a synonym for the adjective brave," announced Clem, looking over his

shoulder. "How would gallant, do, beloved Aunt?"

Mrs. Field shook her head impatiently.

"Not at all," she said severely. "As you must see, if you look closely, this word must have ten letters. The one you suggest has only—let me see—seven? Yes, seven. You must see for yourself that won't do."

"Courageous," suggested Meg.

Aunt Jane brightened.

"Well, I'm glad some one has some sense! Courageous is right, of course. That accounts for the *s* in sausage."

Stifling their mirth, the girls clattered below, glad to be released from the tyranny of Mrs. Field's hobby.

In the tiny cabin the girls undressed hurriedly. They rolled up their clothing in as neat bundles as possible and left them, with apologies to Mrs. Jane Field, and in a corner of the cabin.

Up on deck, Clem showed them an anxious face.

"It's going to be a bad storm, girls. Hadn't you better stay aboard the *Liberty* till the worst of it is over?"

However, the girls would not hear to such a suggestion.

"We're not afraid of thunder and lightning," they told him. "And certainly the rain need have no terrors for us."

Clem again protested, but the girls paid no heed to him. They were hastened in their departure by a thoughtful:

"Now, let me see, what can *that* word be!" from Mrs. Jane Field.

"See you later," cried Stella hastily, and disappeared.

Clem waited until the canoes had resumed their original positions, made sure that the towlines were once more secure, then started the *Liberty*.

The rain had begun to come down heavily. The lightning was closer and the thunder more threatening.

With a thrill of delight the girls in the *Puck* and the *Nevermind* felt the tingle of the rain on arms and shoulders. They turned their faces up to the lightning and waved their hands at it in pagan glee.

The *Liberty* seemed to catch their spirit of abandon to the storm. Its engine putt-putted loudly, as though in impotent competition with the thunder. Its speed increased until the *Puck* and the *Nevermind,* flying after it, seemed scarcely to touch the water.

It was a marvelous sensation to those of the girls who knew canoes and were not afraid of them. To Meg and Lota, it was just a little terrifying.

"I wish he would slow down," Meg said uneasily. "Oh, that time we shipped water!"

"Just sit still and there won't be any danger," counseled Carolyn. "The *Puck* and the *Nevermind* are built for speed. Feel that rain! Isn't it delicious?"

Lota clapped her hands over her ears as a peal of thunder broke directly overhead. It petered off into fainter rumblings and was immediately followed by a louder clap. Lightning streaked across an angry sky in jagged flashes.

Behind them in the *Nevermind,* Stella Sibley and Irene Moore were filled with pagan delight. They knelt in the canoe like priestesses invoking the god of the storm and watched the angry heavens with wonder and awe.

"It makes one feel mighty unimportant, doesn't it?" queried Irene, struggling with a sudden sense of humility. "We're only tiny little specks kneeling here in a thing made of wood that the lightning could smash to atoms

if it took a notion to. Why—we're nothing."

Stella laughed.

"Don't get all worked up over it, Irene. If we are nothing, we certainly get a good deal of fun out of being that way. There! The thunder's growing fainter. I'm afraid the storm is almost over."

Her prophecy was justified when a few moments later, with the suddenness of summer storms, the rain stopped and the sun peeped out from behind a cloud.

The girls bailed the *Puck* and the *Nevermind* and set themselves to dry out. This was easily done, since the sun was hot and the air, driven past them by the speed of the *Liberty,* was brisk and fresh.

They came at last to the limits of Rainbow Lake. Clem swerved to the east and found the narrow channel that separated Rainbow Lake from its sister body of water, Lake Ronson. Here he slowed the speed of the motorboat.

They passed through the channel safely and out into Lake Ronson. Here Clem again stopped the *Liberty* and shouted through his megaphone.

"Time for eats?" he wanted to know.

The girls agreed and once more paddled close to the *Liberty,* swarming aboard her.

They found that Mrs. Field had deserted her cross-word puzzles long enough to concoct an excellent lunch in the tiny galley of the motorboat.

The hot food tasted good and the girls became so grateful to Mrs. Field for her share in preparing it that they made no protest when she later captured them and dragged them off on deck to help her solve her latest puzzle.

They were not very bright, however, for they were drugged with fresh air, hot food, and sunshine. Their suggestions in regard to words ending in *i o n* or *t e r* were so ludicrously wide of the mark that their eccentric hostess finally gave them up and confined herself frowningly to her own ideas on the subject.

During this pleasant interlude, Clem made a suggestion that met with prompt favor on the part of the girls.

"Why not take it easy this afternoon? We can cruise around a bit and enjoy the sights —I think Lake Ronson is every bit as pretty as Rainbow. We can stop for the night at Tumble Inn. That's on the west shore of the

lake, you know, and if there aren't accommodations at the Inn, we can always find one of the cottagers to put us up."

This sounded good to the Outdoor Girls, who were lazy and inclined to loaf for the rest of the day, anyway.

The program was carried out to the letter, and they arrived at the dock outside Tumble Inn promptly at five-thirty o'clock, a tired, hungry group of young folks, eager for food and the society of their kind.

They found accommodations at the Inn without any trouble—two large double rooms for the Outdoor Girls, a pleasant front room for Mrs. Field and a cubbyhole for Clem.

Though there would be no dancing at the Inn, the girls dressed themselves as carefully as they had the evening before and descended to the old-fashioned dining room.

As they hesitated in the doorway, a pretty girl rose from one of the side tables and came quickly across to them.

"Hello, Carolyn! How nice to see you. Say, have you heard the news about Hal Duckworth?"

CHAPTER XIV

BAD NEWS

"HAVE you heard the news about Hal Duckworth?"

Carolyn Cooper was slightly taken aback by this peculiar salutation addressed to her by a girl whom she had not seen for some time and whom she had certainly not expected to meet at Tumble Inn on Lake Ronson.

She stared in a puzzled way at her questioner.

"Hal Duckworth? Why, I—we saw him only two days ago. Nothing has happened to him in that time, surely!"

The girl looked wise and shook her head and was about to open her mouth for further revelations when Clem Field and his aunt appeared.

Dazedly, Carolyn made the introductions.

"An old friend of mine, folks. I knew her before I went to Deepdale. Where are you living now, Ann?"

"In Narrowsburg—up the lake. That's how I came to hear about your friend, Hal."

The girl, whose name was Ann Farron, hesitated, evidently torn between a desire to divulge her news and an equally strong urge to finish her dinner first.

Appetite prevailed. She smiled at them and turned back to the table.

"Guess my news will keep," she said. "See you later."

Tumble Inn provided an excellent dinner, but, someway, Carolyn Cooper could not keep her mind upon the food. She ate indifferently and from time to time cast a puzzled look in the direction of Ann Farron.

The other Outdoor Girls and Clem Field were more puzzled than worried by the pending revelation. They had seen Hal only two days before. What could have happened to him since then?

"That traveling salesman's job," mused Carolyn, thinking aloud. "He had to travel all over on his motorcycle. Something may have happened—an accident."

"Then Dick Blossom would have been involved, too," Meg reminded her. "He and Hal were going together. This friend of yours said nothing whatever about Dick."

"That's true, too," said Carolyn, slightly reassured. "I suppose I'm foolish to worry. Hal must be all right. But then, what could Ann Farron have meant?"

They were enlightened on this point directly after the meal.

There were not many young people at Tumble Inn. The pleasant, quiet place was a rendezvous for older people who were in need of rest, fresh air, and plentiful, wholesome food.

There were cottages clustered about the Inn in which congregated artists of more or less repute, absorbed in their work and in each other for the most part, and who would have little appeal for the modern youth, intent upon vigorous active enjoyment.

Some of these artists came to Tumble Inn for meals, departing immediately afterwards.

Ann Farron had been dragged to this quiet spot by an elderly aunt who loved the peace of Tumble Inn and had insisted that her niece accompany her for a week or two and thus provide the stimulus of young society.

"A regular old folks home," Ann confided to the Outdoor Girls, as she drew them to a secluded corner of the porch. "It's so lone-

some I'm afraid I'll die of it. But I'm Aunt Ann's favorite niece, besides being her namesake, and I have to humor the poor old soul."

Mrs. Jane Field had taken to Ann Farron's aunt at once, upon the confession of the latter that she had once been interested in crossword puzzles. With all the zeal of an addict, Aunt Jane set herself to reawaken that interest at once.

The Outdoor Girls viewed this friendship with pleasure, since it gave them an opportunity to talk, uninterrupted, with the niece.

Clem, as though abashed by so much femininity, wandered off for a stroll in the woods. He went gloomily, having vainly urged Irene to accompany him.

Now, settled comfortably in a remote corner of the broad veranda, Carolyn at once broached the subject that was uppermost in their minds.

"What's all this about Hal Duckworth, Ann?" she asked. "What mischief has he been up to?"

"Plenty," the girl retorted. It was evident that she felt the importance of the news she was about to relate. "He has got himself into a peck of trouble and it's my guess he won't find it very easy to get out."

"What kind of trouble?" asked Stella Sibley quietly.

"Well, you see, Hal has been traveling about the country selling razor blades. You knew that, I suppose?"

"We knew he had taken a job as a traveling salesman," Carolyn said impatiently. "That's no crime, I should hope."

"Well, a lot depends on what you sell," Ann said sagaciously. "I don't know the whole story. I got only a sort of garbled account of it. But it seems that Hal has been selling fake razor blades."

"Fake razor blades!" repeated Carolyn incredulously. "Why, that's just plain silly! Hal Duckworth wouldn't sell fake anything!"

Ann shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"Well, I'm only telling you what I read in the papers," she said.

Carolyn gave a little cry of consternation.

"If it's in the papers, then Hal's reputation is ruined, anyway! Oh dear! How could he be so foolish!"

"Now don't get all excited, Carolyn, until we hear the whole story," Meg Bronson advised.

"Probably isn't half as bad as it sounds," said Lota comfortingly.

Pretty, shallow Ann Farron saw that her story was being robbed of its merit as a startling bit of news. It was plain that she must play her trump card, something that would make these girls sit up and take notice.

"Seems to me there must have been something to it when they could talk of having him arrested!" she stated.

Carolyn jumped to her feet.

"They haven't done it, Ann! They haven't had him arrested?"

"Not yet," returned Ann, half wishing that she could answer in the affirmative. "But they are talking about it."

"I'm going home!" cried Carolyn. "I'm going home immediately!"

CHAPTER XV

DANGER

In her distracted state of mind, Carolyn Cooper actually started toward the porch steps as if to put her decision into immediate execution.

Stella Sibley's quiet voice detained her.

"Don't be silly, Carolyn. You know very well you can't start for Deepdale at this time of night. Besides, Hal isn't in Deepdale. He's in Narrowsburg."

"Then I'm going to Narrowsburg!" But Carolyn spoke with less conviction. She was beginning to realize reluctantly that there was little, if anything, that she could hope to do.

"Hal can take care of himself." Lota tried to speak reassuringly. "If he has been selling bogus razor blades, you can be sure he is as surprised as any of the rest of us to find it out. He certainly never meant to sell them."

"If anybody says he did, I'll—I'll choke her," said Carolyn brokenly.

"Don't be silly, Carolyn," said Meg

brusquely. "You know how much we all think of Hal. We know that he would never, intentionally, do a dishonest thing. If he has got himself in a jam, we will all get together and pull him out of it. That's all."

"Let's sleep on it, anyway," suggested Irene. "We can't do a thing to-night. To-morrow we may have less unpleasant news."

Carolyn was forced to take this advice, because there was nothing else to do. But she spent an uneasy night, what sleep she was able to get being punctuated by visions of Hal in jail, looking deserted and forlorn.

By daylight, as Irene had predicted, the situation took on a rosier hue.

Perhaps Ann Farron had exaggerated. Carolyn admitted that her friend was given to that practice.

There might have been some little trouble in Narrowsburg, but certainly it could not be as important as Ann had made it out to be. When they heard the full details they would probably find that she had been making a mountain out of a molehill.

In the radiant sunshine of the morning, it was almost easy to persuade themselves that this was so. They let the matter rest there temporarily, hoping to get more defi-

nite details of the rumor in the near future.

They were up bright and early, eager to continue their trip. Clem offered to tow them farther up Lake Ronson, but this they gently but firmly refused.

"If we let the *Liberty* do all our work, where is the credit to us?" Stella pointed out to him. "No, Clem, we've enjoyed your company and all that——"

"To say nothing of Aunt Jane," put in Irene, twinkling.

"To say nothing of Aunt Jane," agreed Stella gravely. "But from this point we go on alone. Better say good-by to Irene now," she added mischievously. "We'll be off in half an hour."

It developed that Mrs. Jane Field had determined to stay at Tumble Inn for a few days or weeks, or until such time as she wearied of the place. She had found a kindred soul in the person of Ann Farron's aunt and the two ladies had settled down to an orgy of cross-word puzzles.

"Which means that I shall have to dance attendance upon my beloved aunt for an indefinite period," said Clem gloomily. "You girls might have a heart and let me come along."

Stella remained firm.

"If we had wanted boys along we'd have asked you in the first place. This time we will have our fun alone."

A short time later the Outdoor Girls set off in the *Puck* and the *Nevermind,* waving good-by to Clem and Ann Farron and Mrs. Jane Field, who called out to them at the last minute to give her a word of six letters, ending in *d e r.*

"Murder," called Irene.

Mrs. Field shook her head, said that would never do and begged them to try again. However, by this time the Outdoor Girls were too far away to try again, a fact for which they were sincerely grateful.

Now it was Stella's turn to take the lead. She placed her compass in a prominent place and consulted it frequently. She was on unfamiliar ground—or water—and Ronson was a tricky lake, wandering off into tempting side pockets which delivered one up to marsh or morass if one were not very careful to follow the course marked out by the chart.

For two days they wandered lazily and uneventfully up the lake, encountering perfect weather and stopping overnight at cottages along the lake shore.

This time would have been completely happy for them, had it not been for their anxiety over Hal Duckworth.

Whenever they stopped at a place where people foregathered they tried to get news of him but, so far, had been entirely unsuccessful.

Carolyn Cooper worried and fretted, but said little. She hated to spoil the enjoyment of her companions. They were having such a wonderful time.

It was on the third day, and they had successfully navigated the longest stretch of Lake Ronson and were nearing the limits of that beautiful body of water.

"To-morrow we'll enter Supper Lake." Stella had brought the *Nevermind* close to the *Puck* and the two canoes drifted while the leader of the Outdoor Girls thoughtfully consulted the map of the chain of lakes.

"Supper is tiny compared to Lake Ronson. We'll probably make it in a day. Then will come Casto and Tonk. We're making good time, girls. We're well under our schedule."

For some time a lively breeze had been whipping the waters of the lake into bright-tipped ripples. Now the wind freshened sud-

denly. The *Puck* and the *Nevermind* whirled half about beneath the vicious assault.

Startled, Carolyn and Stella seized their paddles, and, with some difficulty, brought the canoes about.

"Squall ahead," warned Irene. "Better make for shore, Stella. Those clouds look like business!"

Stella was frankly worried. The clouds did, indeed, "look like business" and she blamed herself for not noticing that fact earlier in the day.

They had reached a wild and desolate portion of the lake. At this point the water had narrowed and was flanked by steep, rocky banks.

All very well for Irene to advise a landing. But here there was no place to land. Nor, remembered Stella with a tightening of her heart, had they found a suitable landing place for more than a mile back along the shores of the lake.

The stretch ahead looked scarcely more promising, but Stella decided it was the better chance of the two.

With an air of decision, she restored the map to her pocket and gave her orders.

"Full speed ahead! We have to find a place

to land and find it quickly. "If we don't we're sunk—and I mean that literally!"

She and Irene bent to their paddles with a will. The *Nevermind* shot ahead, leaving a little white trail in its wake.

In the *Puck,* Meg was paddling bow. In response to Carolyn's urging she dipped paddle in water and bent to her work with a will.

However, it seemed that the farther they proceeded along the lake, the steeper and rockier grew the banks. Their peril increased with every paddle stroke.

Suddenly the heavens opened and rain came down in a blinding torrent. With the rain came the wind, seeming to the Outdoor Girls a monster bent on their destruction. Could they escape with their lives?

CHAPTER XVI

ROCKS AHEAD

THE paddles of the Outdoor Girls became useless weapons in such a contest. The *Puck* and the *Nevermind* were whirled about like toy boats at the mercy of the terrible wind.

Stella and Irene had more chance of winning through to safety than had the girls in the *Puck*. Both girls were old hands with the paddle. They knew just what to do and did it without stopping for conscious decision.

Meg was still more or less of a tyro. Though she heard Carolyn's frantic instructions and did her best to obey them, she became frightened and hopelessly confused, so that, in the end, she could scarcely tell her left hand from her right.

"Ship your paddle, Meg!" Carolyn cried at last. "You do more harm than good, although goodness knows you try hard enough. I'll have to fight this out alone."

"Look at the rocks!" shrieked Lota, as a

temporary rift in the sheeting rain revealed their danger. "Veer off, Carolyn! We'll be dashed to pieces!"

"Looks like it," said Carolyn through gritted teeth. "I'm doing my best, Lota!"

Meanwhile, Stella Sibley and Irene Moore had lost sight of the *Puck*. With the storm, darkness, almost of night, had fallen over the landscape. The sheeting rain cast a veil over lake and shore alike, so that only the nearest objects were dimly visible.

"The rocks!" moaned Irene, much as Lota had done. "They're right ahead of us, Stella! If we strike them, we're lost!"

"The rocks are on all sides of us," retorted Stella grimly. "We've hardly a chance in the world not to strike them. Look out to starboard! Back paddle, Irene. Back paddle hard!"

They back paddled frantically, managing by their best efforts to hold the forward course of the canoe in check.

"We can't keep this up long!" gasped Irene. "Stella, it's shallow here. I'm going to jump!"

"Don't be a fool!" cried Stella sharply. "Do you want to kill yourself?"

However, Irene either did not hear or pre-

tended not to. She abandoned her useless efforts with the paddle, took a deep breath, and jumped out into the water.

The girl lost her footing on the slimy bottom of the lake and went under. She was up almost immediately, grappling with the canoe, hanging her weight on it.

It was useless. The canoe dragged her with it—always nearer to the rocks!

Stella gasped:

"It's no good, Irene! I can't hold off any longer! I'm done!"

Then she saw it—a narrow inlet not more than a paddle's length away, a break in the solid, rocky face of the shore!

Panting, she pointed it out to Irene.

"If we can hold off the rocks that long, we're safe. Help me, Irene. Help me."

Irene helped. She flung herself upon the canoe like a young tigress, pulling, tugging, while Stella dug her paddle into the water in long, sweeping strokes.

The wind howled at them. The rain dashed in their faces, half-blinding them. But they held the canoe off the rocks until they came to that narrow gap.

The gale bore down upon them with fresh vehemence. The *Nevermind* was flung up

upon the pebbly bank and lay there, half on its side, the water washing over it.

Stella jumped to the ground, staggering a little beneath the impact of the wind.

"We—we've got to drag it up farther," she gasped. "Save the—save the duffel."

Irene sprang to her help and together they dragged the *Nevermind* to safety.

The rain was blinding. The wind whipped the breath from their lips. They could scarcely stand beneath the terrific onslaught of the blast.

"The *Puck* will—be wrecked!" Irene gasped. "We've got to get help."

Together they fought their way up the bank, with no notion of where they should look for help, only their blind need driving them on.

They tried to call, but their voices were lost in the noise of the storm. The wind buffeted them unmercifully. They could not see where they were going, and so time and again fell to their knees, only to scramble up gamely and push on.

Once Stella fell flat and lay there for a few seconds, fighting to recover the breath that returned but slowly to her aching lungs.

Finally Irene stopped and wiped a mud-stained hand across her eyes.

"It's no use," she gasped. "We're not—getting anywhere."

From Stella's lips issued a croaking sound that might, under happier circumstances, have been taken for a shout of joy.

"There's a house!" she cried. "And it has a light in it!"

Irene looked in the direction Stella indicated and did see a flickering light and the shadowy outlines of a building.

The two girls turned their stumbling, weary feet in that direction.

A few minutes later they found the door of the cabin and knocked urgently upon it. No sound forthcoming, Stella leaned impatiently against the door.

Rather to her surprise, it yielded easily, so easily that she half fell into the room.

Irene followed, drawing a hand across suddenly dazzled eyes.

There were only a few sticks of furniture in the place, chief among these being a rough pine table with an oil lamp on it.

An old man was seated near the table, an old man who chewed a cud of tobacco with great enjoyment and bent over a newspaper.

At the boisterous entrance of the girls, he looked up in mild surprise.

"Well now," he drawled, "you're apt to scare an old fellow clean to death, busting in on him thataway. What you want, now, and where'd you come from, anyway?"

The girls were still panting from their struggle with the storm. Also, the old man proved to be a little deaf, so that it was necessary for them to tell their story twice before he was able to understand it.

Once he did understand there was no uncertainty about the old man's actions. From a hook in the wall he took down sou'wester and rubber hat. He armed himself with a long coil of rope and turned to the door.

"You'd better set and rest up," he advised. "I'll be back purty soon and I'll bring your friends with me—leastways, I hope I will."

The opening of the door let in a rush of wind. As the old man stepped out into the storm, Stella Sibley and Irene Moore followed him.

CHAPTER XVII

ADRIFT IN THE STORM

WHEN the old man found that the two Outdoor Girls were bent upon accompanying him, he tried to order them back.

However, when they begged to be permitted to help in the search, pointing out that they would be able to indicate the place where they had lost sight of the *Puck,* the old fellow made no further objection, but motioned them to come along.

Their guide was amazingly strong and swift, considering his white hair and the elderly stoop to his shoulders. His long strides ate up the ground and the Outdoor Girls were put to it to keep up with him.

It did not occur to them at the time to wonder much concerning the identity of their new acquaintance. They were far too concerned with the fate of the *Puck* and those aboard her.

They came to the shores of the lake in far

less time than the girls had needed to make the climb to the old man's cabin.

The wind still blew a gale, but the rain had slackened.

Up and down the shore they paced, anxiously looking for signs of the *Puck* and calling loudly.

It was Stella who finally saw it. She cried out excitedly and pointed to the bobbing object on the water, to which three other objects clung.

"The *Puck* has overturned! But see—the girls are safe! They had the sense to hang on to the canoe!"

"At that, they must be almost drowned!" cried Irene. The old woodsman had already set off to the help of the distressed craft. The girls followed, running to keep up with his long strides.

They paused on the bank directly above the overturned canoe. The old man tied the rope in a cowboy knot and coiled it above his head like a lariat. It landed close to the canoe and within the reach of Carolyn Cooper's arm.

The girl caught it, slipped it over her head and under her arms. She continued to cling to the canoe while the woodsman towed her

and her burden up the lake toward the cleft in the rocky shoreline which Irene and Stella had previously found.

There the weary girls were pulled ashore, thoroughly soaked and frightened, but otherwise none the worse for their experience.

"It was lucky you came when you did," said Carolyn, as she tumbled to her feet and squeezed the water from her dripping garments. "We were all so weary we couldn't have held on much longer."

"Why didn't you let go the canoe and swim for the shore?" Irene queried.

"We didn't want to abandon the *Puck,*" said Lota.

"Besides, it looked like pretty dangerous business, trying to land on those rocks with the wind blowing a gale," added Meg. "We thought we'd hang on for a while and trust to luck that help would come."

"And help did," said Carolyn, with a wan smile. "The question is, how do we spend the night and where?"

Here the old woodsman spoke, suggesting that they come to his cabin, dry out their clothes, and then wait until the storm stopped before trying to continue their trip.

"I'll make a fire and give you something

to eat," he offered, a twinkle in his sharp old eyes. "I never saw a time when grub went amiss with young folks."

The Outdoor Girls accepted gratefully, for there was something about the gaunt old man that inspired trust.

The *Puck* was pulled up beside the *Nevermind,* to rest there face downward on the bank while the woodsman shouldered the heavy duffel bags and strode off with them as easily as though they had been filled with feathers.

Up they straggled, a sorry, weary procession, dripping water. The snug cabin with its oil lamp and the newspaper lying on the table beside it where the old man had dropped it when he went to get his slicker seemed like a sanctuary.

The girls crowded in and looked about them while pools of water began to gather on the neatly scrubbed pine floor.

The old man bustled about, laying a fire in the stove and begging his unexpected guests to make themselves at home.

"We have fresh clothing in one of these bags," Stella suggested. "If we could go somewhere to change, we'd all feel a little better

and look a little better. Besides, we're tracking up your lovely clean floor."

With a twinkle in his eyes, the old man opened the door to a room that was evidently his bedroom.

"If you will tell me what bag your clothes are in I'll tote it in for you," he offered.

"We're not sure," returned Stella doubtfully. "I guess, if you don't mind, we'll have to have both."

The old man accommodated them and shut the door upon them with the injunction to "hurry a mite, for supper'll soon be ready."

Gratefully, the girls stripped off their wet clothes and substituted dry ones from the waterproof duffel bag.

"Lucky we bought the best bags on the market," Irene remarked. "These have already paid for themselves."

From the main room of the cabin came the cheerful sounds of crackling fire and frying bacon. The girls sniffed hungrily.

"What luck to have found a place like this!" Carolyn exclaimed, as she drew on a dry pair of stockings.

"We rate a little luck," grumbled Meg "We've had plenty of the other thing."

"It's all my fault," said Stella, generously shouldering the blame. "I should have seen the storm coming up and made for shore long before."

"What's the matter with the rest of us?" Lota wanted to know. "We're not blind."

When the Outdoor Girls reëntered the main room of the cabin they looked very different from the bedraggled lot the old woodsman had helped to rescue from the waters of Lake Ronson. The old man's eyes twinkled appreciation of that fact.

" 'Tain't often I get the chance to entertain a lot o' sech purty young ladies," said he. "Does an old feller's heart good just to look at you. Sit down now, and I'll give you bacon and eggs and jam, which is about all I have in the larder 'ceptin' canned stuff."

Their host had spread a red checkered cloth over the table and laid out knives and forks and plates and spoons and some battered old cups.

On the plates he placed mounds of golden eggs with bacon cut up through it. Into the cups he poured strong hot tea. Then he sat down before a heaped-up plate of his own and smiled companionably at them.

"Fall to and don't fret about ceremony,"

he invited the girls. "I ain't used to it and I'd feel more at home without it."

To the girls' gratitude was added a sincere liking for this queer old fellow who lived all alone in the woods and was such an excellent cook.

They began to relate their experiences since leaving Deepdale, and as they proceeded their host's keen old eyes quickened with interest.

"Do tell!" he drawled. "Seems like girls can have most as good a time as boys these days. But then, times have changed since I was a young un."

Carolyn Cooper tactfully turned the conversation to their host, drawing him out as to his boyhood and the circumstances which had led him to living, as he now did, like a hermit in the woods.

The old fellow was ready enough to talk, revealing, among other things, that his name was Wellington Cox and that he made his living by fishing, trapping, and basket weaving.

He brought forth some baskets for their inspection and these were so quaint in design and color and so cunningly woven that the Outdoor Girls were delighted with them and bought several of them at once, promising to

send their friends to the old woodsman to look at his wares.

After supper the girls insisted upon clearing away the dishes, and Wellington Cox watched them with a softened light in his keen old eyes.

"Purty children," he thought. "It's been a right smart while since I've seen the like o' them. Wish I could keep 'em here for always."

After the dishes were cleared away they all sat about the dying fire in the stove, lazily content.

Wellington Cox related more of his experiences while fishing and trapping in the woods, then inquired with interest concerning the future plans of the Outdoor Girls.

They told him that it had been their intention in the start to explore all the chain of lakes beginning with Rainbow.

"But we don't have to go on to the end," Meg Bronson explained. "If we get tired, it's in the agreement that we can turn back toward Deepdale at any time."

"H'm!" said the old man, in a noncommittal tone.

He said nothing more until he had filled and lighted his pipe, puffing on it vigorously for a moment or two to make sure the to-

bacco was well caught. Then he asked in an elaborately casual tone:

"Was you figurin', by any chance, on visitin' Tonk Lake?"

The girls looked at Mr. Cox curiously.

"Why, yes," said Stella, speaking for all of them. "Is there any reason why we shouldn't?" she asked after a moment of silence.

"Well," drawled Wellington Cox, "seems to me like there's every reason why you shouldn't. If you was my girls you'd not go a step into Tonk Lake."

The Outdoor Girls were surprised and a little startled, for there was something almost solemn about the old man's way of pronouncing judgment.

"But why?" asked Irene, a little belligerently. She had counted a good deal upon going up Tonk Lake. "What's wrong with it?"

The old man shook his head.

"It ain't healthy up that way. Take an old man's advice and steer clear of it!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HAUNTED MILL

NATURALLY, the Outdoor Girls wanted a fuller explanation than Wellington Cox had already vouchsafed them as a reason for keeping away from Tonk Lake. They had no intention of changing their plans unless the reasons for doing so appeared to them sufficiently urgent.

So they besieged the old trapper with questions until he threw up his hands in dismay.

"I don't actually know anything about it," he finally confessed. "But I've heard from folks supposed to know that there's queer doin's up Tonk Lake way. Dark and suspicious doin's, if you believe the rumors that come back from there. I'd say, at a rough guess, that it ain't extra healthy to be mixed up in 'em."

"What kind of doings?" Stella Sibley insisted.

The old man knocked the ashes from his pipe and shook his head reluctantly.

"I've never tried to find out," he confessed. "It ain't none o' my business, and I'm old enough to have learned not to mix up in anything that ain't."

So far from being a deterrent, the old man's news was something of a challenge to the Outdoor Girls. The prospect of danger made the undertaking all the more alluring.

Sensing something of this, the old man tried another argument.

"Ain't very interestin' up that way, anyway," he said. "There's nothin' but marsh and waste land along Tonk Lake. Much better try the Notgint River. It's got a purty landscape and plenty o' things to see."

Irresistibly drawn, Lota Bronson returned to the subject of Tonk Lake.

"You know more about the mystery up that way than you've told us. I know you do. I've guessed all along you were holding something back. Please Mr. Cox," she added pleadingly, "tell us the truth. If there is real danger up Tonk Lake way, we'd much better know what it is."

The old trapper sent her a humorous glance and puffed in silence for a moment or two.

"I don't aim to scare you, but if you're sure you want the truth——"

"We do!" the girls assured him eagerly.

"Well, there's an old brown mill about the middle o' Tonk Lake. Can't say from personal experience, but I've heard folks say it was haunted."

"What makes you think so?" asked Stella.

"I don't think so," the old fellow corrected her. "But there's folks as claim to have seen pow'ful strange sights round the old mill. Lights movin' at night and queer sounds of groanin' in the daytime. Seems to me like it's a good place to keep away from."

This information sobered the girls. They thought it over for a few moments, trying to picture the old brown mill. It must be admitted that Tonk Lake was beginning to lose some of its attraction for them.

"Think it over," said Wellington Cox. "You ain't got to decide to-night. But if I was you I'd give Tonk Lake a wide berth. That's my candid advice."

Some of the girls were inclined to agree with the old man. Only Meg Bronson and Irene Moore held out against him, declaring that they feared neither ghosts nor human beings.

However, they followed their host's advice to the extent of promising to "sleep on it"

and come to a final decision in the morning.

Outside, the rain came down with violence. The wind still howled about the little cabin. The Outdoor Girls had no choice but to accept their odd host's generously offered hospitality.

There proved to be a third room to the cabin. This contained two folding cots which Mr. Cox set up expertly and covered with fresh linen. The large bed in the other room could accommodate three of the girls, by squeezing.

When they protested that Wellington Cox himself had no place to sleep, the old man shrugged his bent shoulders and replied with a chuckle that he could sleep quite comfortably rolled up in a blanket in the main room of the shack.

"Many's the time I've slep' out in the open with the rain rockin' me to sleep," he said. "I'll be all right. Don't you fret about me."

The girls did not fret, for they had scarcely touched head to pillow before they were sunk fathoms deep in a dreamless sleep.

They were awake bright and early but found that Wellington Cox was up before them.

Dressed to continue the trip—their clothes

had dried out overnight—the girls entered the kitchen, or dining room, or whatever the main room of the shack was called, to find breakfast ready for them.

It consisted of much the same fare as dinner the night before. As then, it was well cooked and plentiful and the girls ate ravenously.

When they offered to pay the old man for his hospitality, an offended look in his keen eyes warned them not to persist.

"It's been a pleasure to have you," he said, and they could not doubt his sincerity. "If you pass this way again I'd take it as a favor if you'd stop in and cheer up a lonely old fellow."

They promised that they would, and Wellington Cox went with them to the lake, carrying their duffel bags.

The day was gloriously clear, with that keen, clean tang in the air that always follows a heavy rainfall.

With the help of the old trapper, the Outdoor Girls upturned the *Puck* and the *Nevermind* and climbed happily into them. As they shoved off from shore they waved their paddles at their late host, promising to return

soon and send their friends to look at his baskets.

The old man stood on the bank, a wistful figure, looking after the girls until they had rounded a bend in the lake and disappeared.

"What a fine old fellow," Lota cried. "I've a real affection for him."

"After those eggs and the bacon, so have I," laughed Irene.

"I'd love him more if he hadn't scared us about Tonk Lake," said Stella Sibley ruefully.

"Who's afraid?" cried Meg. "Are you, Stella Sibley?"

"Yes and no," returned Stella, with a smile. "I haven't quite made up my mind. But I've a feeling I ought to be," she added honestly.

Somehow, in the bright sunshine of the morning the story of the old brown mill seemed far-fetched, melodramatic, and overdrawn.

"You know how those rumors are," Irene argued. "Some entirely harmless, simple little thing happens, and right away it's exaggerated by a lot of hysterical people and you have a haunted house, or mill or what-have-you."

"We'll go up Tonk Lake for a way," Stella compromised. "If we don't like it we'll back out and paddle up the Notgint River. I'm curious enough to want to see for myself what's wrong with the old brown mill."

That day they paddled up Supper Lake. It was smaller than either Rainbow Lake or Lake Ronson, and by evening they found that they had put almost all of it behind them.

Their objective was the Shadyside Hotel at the foot of the lake where they hoped to find accommodations for the night.

They found a pleasant little cove where they beached their canoes and from there went on up to the house.

The hotel was thronging with summer boarders, and the Outdoor Girls felt themselves quite fortunate to be able to procure two tiny little rooms at the extreme top of the house.

The rooms were hot and none too comfortable, but the girls made no protest, since they expected only to spend the night and start out bright and early again the following morning.

They met a number of young people whom they knew, some of them from Deepdale.

"You're lucky," said Dolly Brant, a short,

plump girl with sparkling brown eyes. "We're giving a fancy dress dance to-night. You girls must come."

"But we've no costumes," protested Carolyn Cooper.

"We'll fix you up," promised Dolly Brant.

An hilarious half hour in Dolly Brant's bedroom followed. At the end of this time the Outdoor Girls emerged so greatly changed that it is to be doubted whether their own nearest and dearest friends would have recognized them.

They had a jolly time, dancing till almost morning. It was not until the dance was breaking up that Irene Moore noticed that Carolyn was no longer with them. She spoke of this to Stella, and the two girls went in search of the absent one.

They scanned the lobby and the broad veranda and inquired of friends whether they had seen anything of Carolyn Cooper in the grounds about the hotel. When this question was answered repeatedly in the negative, they began to be seriously worried.

"Maybe she felt sick or tired and went upstairs to lie down," Stella suggested.

They went up to the top floor and found

Carolyn in one of the rooms they had taken for the night.

The girl sat in a chair near the one window the room boasted. She clutched a newspaper in her hand. The hand that held the paper trembled and her face was startlingly white.

Stella ran across to her and shook her gently.

"Are you ill, Carolyn?"

For answer, the girl held the paper out to her. She said in a whisper:

"They've arrested Hal!"

CHAPTER XIX

WHAT HAPPENED TO HAL

STELLA SIBLEY accepted the newspaper that Carolyn handed to her and hastily read the paragraph pointed out. Irene looked over her shoulder.

There could be no doubt about it. In ruthless black and white, the headlines told of the arrest of several salesmen accused of selling bogus razor blades. Prominent among these names was that of Hal Duckworth of Deepdale.

Stella and Irene sat down on the edge of the bed and painstakingly read the article through.

It appeared that large quantities of razor blades, supposedly put out by the Imperial Radoflex Safety Razor Corporation, had appeared on the market, razor blades repudiated by the company as not having been manufactured in their factory.

A man had been sent to discover the source of this illicit trade and had eventually ar-

rested Hal Duckworth and four other men accused of selling the bogus blades.

Raids had been made upon an office in Deepdale and one in Albany, only to find that the officials had flown. The sponsors of the illicit trade had apparently scented trouble. The offices were deserted.

"Must be something fraudulent about the thing," said Irene, breaking the silence for the first time. "Otherwise, the men who called themselves agents for the Radoflex Corporation would have stayed and faced the music."

"Of course there's something fraudulent about it," Carolyn retorted bitterly. "But Hal and those other four men didn't know that. They had no idea the razor blades weren't genuine. Read on down the column for a little way and you'll find that out."

The salesmen all protested their innocence, so the article stated. None of them would admit that he had any knowledge of the dishonest character of the company that had employed them as salesmen for their product. They supposed the goods were genuine, so they said, and had acted on that belief.

Efforts had been made, the article stated, to discover the plant at which the bogus blades were being turned out in such large quan-

tities. The Imperial Radoflex Safety Razor Corporation, finding that goods not produced by their factories but using their trademark were flooding the market in several large cities, as well as in smaller places, had offered a reward of five thousand dollars for the discovery of the plant manufacturing the bogus blades and the conviction of the men operating the plant.

"There's five thousand dollars for some lucky person," Irene observed.

"They will never find the plant or the men in charge of it," said Carolyn dispiritedly. "If you read on you will see that the police are not even sure the plant is in this country. The blades may be imported. Meanwhile, Hal is in a terrible jam."

At that moment, Meg and Lota Bronson came in. They were inclined to be reproachful at the desertion of their friends, but when they heard Carolyn's story they forgot everything else in concern for Hal.

"That's the sequel to Ann Farron's story," said Stella thoughtfully, after the Bronson twins had read the account in the paper. "Poor Hal! He will prove his innocence, of course."

"That may not be as simple as it sounds," said Caroyln unhappily. "It's easier to get

caught in a net like this than to get out of it. If Hal is convicted of a thing like this it—it will ruin his career for life!"

Stella went over and patted her shoulder.

"It can't be as bad as that, Carolyn. What Hal needs is a good lawyer——" She broke off, her face bright with inspiration.

"Allen Washburn! He's our lawyer and the one who will get Hal out of this fix. I'll telephone to him this minute!"

She started for the door, but was reminded of the lateness of the hour by a glance at her wrist watch.

"Probably Hal has already asked Allen to defend him," Irene pointed out. "It would be the natural thing for him to do."

"And if Hal didn't ask, Allen would offer," Meg added.

"We'll have to put off phoning Deepdale till the morning, but I'll do it the first thing, anyway," said Stella. "Meanwhile, you are not to worry, Carolyn. Trust Allen. He will fix things up for Hal if anyone can," and she put an arm about the heartsick girl.

"If anyone can," repeated Carolyn, with a dreary little shake of her head.

A telephone call to Deepdale the next morning confirmed both hopes and fears.

Stella phoned direct to Allen Washburn's office and got the young lawyer in person.

"Hal is out on bail. So are the other salesmen for these bogus blades. I'm representing Hal, Stella—what's that?—Yes, he asked me to and I'm only too glad to help the poor old boy—What's that?—Yes, he's had pretty tough luck, but I think we can get him out of it all right. I'll have to, if I want to keep peace in the family. Betty is ranting around here like something gone mad—What's that? No, the police haven't been able to get track of the plant that has been turning out the blades. The rascals are clever and seem to have covered their tracks well—What did you say?—No, the police haven't made much headway. They have turned up one little clue, however. They're off on the trail of two men named Levine and Robinson. Here's hoping they catch up with them—Yes, both Betty and Bettykins are well—Yes, I will. Ring me up again and by that time I hope to have better news for you. Give my best to the girls—Sure thing! Good-by."

This conversation cheered Carolyn somewhat. The fact that Hal's case was in Allen's hands gave her some small hope of its happy termination. She, in company with the other

Outdoor Girls, had great faith in Betty's husband, who, they were quite certain, was not only the best lawyer in Deepdale but in the world.

Nevertheless, Carolyn could not altogether throw off her dejection. It was plain that until Hal Duckworth was cleared of the charge against him, she could not take an active interest in anything. For Carolyn, even the canoe trip which the Outdoor Girls had planned with such eager anticipation had gone stale.

"I feel that I ought to go home," she said dejectedly.

"I don't see why," Irene argued. "If it would do Hal any good, we'd all go back, of course. As it is, I think we'd better go on with our trip as if nothing had happened. Hal couldn't be in better hands than Allen's. You admitted that yourself."

"All right," said Carolyn indifferently. "No use spoiling every one else's fun, I suppose."

Because of the necessity of the telephone call to Deepdale, the girls were late getting started.

They reached Lake Casto shortly before noon and, an hour later, stopped on its shores for lunch. They wasted little time over the meal, for they had been warned by the

people at Shadyside Hotel that Casto possessed a dangerous stretch of water known as the rapids, and they were anxious to meet and conquer this dangerous point while there was ample daylight for the undertaking.

After lunch they set out immediately, paddling purposefully toward the outlet of the lake.

It was not long before the sound of swiftly running water warned them that they were near the rapids.

"Be on your guard," called Stella, who had taken the lead with Irene in the *Nevermind*. "There's a tiny fall straight ahead!"

The words were scarcely uttered when the *Nevermind* dipped suddenly. For a moment its stern seemed to point straight up in the air. Then it disappeared from the view of those in the *Puck*.

CHAPTER XX

RUNNING THE RAPIDS

THE disappearance of the forward canoe startled Lota Bronson, who was paddling bow in the *Puck*. She stared at the spot where the *Nevermind* had been and gave voice to a low wail.

"Let's go back!" she cried. "I don't like the looks of that!"

"We can't go back," said Carolyn sharply. "We are already caught in the current."

This was true. The canoe was being swept along by a force not altogether accounted for by the lazy paddling of its crew.

The water hurled them forward. They approached the lip of the falls with breath-taking rapidity.

"Watch yourself, Lota!" called Carolyn. "You and Meg think you have learned to paddle. Now's your chance to prove it."

"I never said I could run a falls," Lota retorted. "Just the same, nobody's going to

call me yellow," and she gripped her paddle with determination.

"That's the talk!" cried Carolyn, and waited eagerly for that moment when the bottom would seem to drop out of the canoe.

The *Nevermind* had reappeared. It could be seen bobbing in the rapids at the foot of the miniature falls.

The bow of the *Puck* was almost over the falls. Lota gripped her paddle and stared wide-eyed at the swirling waters below.

"I'm not scared," she told herself, and grasped her courage with both hands.

For a second or two that seemed an eternity, the craft hovered above the drop. Then the rush of waters swept it over the lip of the falls.

Downward it rushed, downward with the sparkling water, downward with a speed that caught at one's breath and brought a tingling to the flesh, downward amidst a flashing spray that turned to jewels in the sun.

The bow of the canoe struck the bottom of the falls, lifted with a drenching shower of spray, the light craft swept on, tossed and buffeted by the conflicting currents of the rapids.

Here was where Carolyn displayed her skill.

With steady hand and sure eye she directed the course of the *Puck*. Between jagged rocks, past floating logs and other débris, she navigated safely, giving brief orders to Lota as she did so.

They came to quieter water presently and around a bend in the lake they found the *Nevermind,* drawn close to the shore and waiting for them.

"Not having come across your débris, we supposed you had come through safely and all in one piece," called Lota.

"Wasn't that glorious?" called Stella. "Irene and I want to go back and do it over again."

"Not to-day," begged Meg. "I've had enough. Besides, I believe I'm going to be seasick."

"It *was* a rough crossing," agreed Irene, with a giggle. "But why be seasick now, when it's all over?"

"I didn't have time before," said Meg, and continued to press a hand over her "ailing tummy," as she called it. "I think you're mean to laugh," she said reproachfully. "It isn't any joke to me."

There was considerably more talk on the subject, but it was finally decided not to shoot these rapids again that day but to proceed as quickly as possible toward Tonk Lake.

The scenery of Lake Casto became so desolate as they neared Tonk Lake and its shores so devoid of human habitation that the Outdoor Girls finally decided to turn back and seek a night's shelter at one of the bungalows they had glimpsed among the trees.

Here they did not meet with the hospitality that had so far made their trip so successful. They tried at three cottages before they found one that would put them up for the night. At this place they were accepted grudgingly and only after they had convinced the owner of their ability to pay and pay well for a night's lodging.

A man and his wife by the name of Dillingham owned the cottage and they were an unpleasant, suspicious pair. They served the girls sullenly, despite the fact that they were being grossly overpaid for such service as they rendered.

The rooms where the girls slept were dirty, the bed linen grimy, the food poor in quality and wretchedly served. All in all, the adventurers were glad enough when morning came

and they were free to resume their journey.

By noon they had reached the end of Lake Casto and the beginning of Tonk Lake. The scenery had not improved as they progressed. If anything, it had become more dreary and depressing.

At times the lake narrowed so that, by stretching out both paddles, they could almost touch the opposing banks. When it widened again, there was scarcely more to be seen than before. The woodland pressed hard upon the water and there was no sign of human habitation anywhere.

"It looks as if we'd come to a wilderness," said Carolyn Cooper, as she brought the *Puck* up alongside the *Nevermind*. "What say, Stella, think we'd better keep on?"

Stella looked thoughtfully about her at the unprepossessing landscape.

"I don't like it much myself. But it may improve later on. Suppose we have lunch and talk things over."

This was always sure to be a successful suggestion. In proof of the little doubt she had of its acceptance, Stella turned the nose of the *Nevermind* shoreward before she finished her sentence.

Because they were rather distressed at the turn their adventure had taken, the Outdoor Girls feigned an extreme light-heartedness.

Only a short distance into the woods they came upon a pool which they were sure would make excellent fishing. So they "broke out" the rods and went to work.

The fish were slow to bite, but after a while they began to come and the girls soon had a fair-sized mess.

Meg and Lota had already gathered brushwood for the fire and it was not long before the odor of frying fish mingled with the gentler aromas of the woodland.

They made an excellent luncheon, sitting about the fire cross-legged and eating big slabs of fried fish.

"We'll need a bath after this," laughed Meg. "I'm positively fishy from head to foot."

"Well, why not take a swim," Lota suggested. "There's nothing to stop us."

"Except lack of time," said Stella, consulting her watch. "I think we should be on our way, girls. We want to find some sort of shelter for the night, and I don't think we any of us want to be caught out on Tonk Lake after dark."

The prospect was not a pleasing one. The girls put out the fire, saw to it that the camping place was clear of paper and other débris, and went on down to the canoes.

"I did hope we could get in one turn at the harmonicas," Meg said. "How about some harmony, girls?"

"Aren't you afraid we'll alarm the ghosts at the old brown mill?" asked Irene, half laughing and half in earnest. "It must be somewhere in the neighborhood."

That reminder chilled Meg's desire for harmony, and no more was said just then upon the subject.

The canoes were shoved out into the water and the girls scrambled in. As they paddled abreast, they joked about the old brown mill, at the same time keeping a sharp look-out for it on both sides of the lake. In all their joking there was an undercurrent of seriousness that they did not attempt to disguise from each other.

They knew that their adventure, begun light-heartedly, was apt to turn serious at any moment. What if the stories of old Wellington Cox in regard to the brown mill should prove to be true, after all?

"Then we'll have some excitement," said

Irene. "That's what we're always after, isn't it?"

About mid-afternoon the sun became obscured by clouds. A clinging mist spread over land and water, its appearance so gradual that the girls scarcely noticed it until it had become a complication to be reckoned with.

"I suppose we should put in to shore," said Stella worriedly.

"I'd like to know what you'd find if you did, besides a large amount of woods," retorted Meg. "We don't want to stay out in the open all night."

"We might find a shack or something," Stella returned, straining her eyes to make out the opposite bank.

"Or they might take us in at the old brown mill," suggested Lota. She had tried to be funny, but her joke fell flat. No one even pretended to laugh.

"Wonder where this old mill is we've heard so much about. I'd like——" began Carolyn, but she was interrupted by an exclamation from Meg.

"The boat scraped against the rocks right here. We must be almost on top of the shore, Carolyn!"

Stella gave an impatient exclamation.

"We are hopelessly lost," she said. "If we don't keep close together we shall lose each other. We had better try to land."

"Yes, but where?" retorted Lota skeptically.

"The brown mill is on the other side of the lake. People probably lived there when it was in operation—for grinding flour I mean. With luck, we may find some sort of dock where we can make a respectable landing. I think it's our best course, girls. We've got to do something."

"All right, lead on," said Carolyn. "We'll try to keep you in sight."

"What we need now is not a compass but a foghorn," grumbled Meg.

"Your own lungs will do."

"If that's an insult——" began Meg.

"It isn't, silly! it's a compliment. Now do try to keep us in sight."

The *Nevermind* drifted off, a slim wraith in the mist, and the *Puck* followed, paddles dipping noiselessly in the quiet water.

They went on thus for some time, the girls feeling themselves lost in a ghostly white world. Then Stella cried out suddenly and called back a sharp warning to the trailing *Puck*.

"Dock hard ahead! Now say that this isn't luck!"

The *Nevermind* felt its way past the long pile of decaying lumber that thrust out into the water. Carefully Stella maneuvered so as not to scratch the paint from the side of her beloved craft.

The *Puck* trailed slowly, Carolyn feeling her way as Stella had done.

The mist was now so dense that they could see nothing a dozen feet away from them. The woods were shrouded in mystery. Even the sounds seemed hushed. The silence had an eerie quality, as though Nature held her breath, listening to something the girls could not hear.

They caught themselves listening, too, and laughed robustly at such nonsense.

The next moment, however, they knew that they had not been mistaken. There had been a sound—the sound of running footsteps. Then a figure loomed up through the mist.

"Jake!" it cried. "Jake, come here! Hurry! There's a passel o' women trying to land!"

CHAPTER XXI

A MAN, A WOMAN AND A SHOTGUN

THE apparition was a woman. That the Outdoor Girls saw at once. And she carried a shotgun!

The woman came closer to the edge of the dock and peered down at the girls in the canoes. She was heavy-featured and big-boned and her mouth was compressed into a thin line of determination.

"Get out!" she said sharply. "Clear out! Do you hear me?"

"We'd have to be deaf not to," retorted Irene Moore.

Stella Sibley threw her chum a warning glance.

"We are doing no harm," she said to the woman. "We are looking for a place to spend the night. Why won't you let us land?"

Before the woman could answer a second figure loomed up out of the mist.

"The man she called Jake," thought the girls.

He was a big, burly ruffian with a forbidding face. He wrenched the shotgun from the woman's hand.

"Careful how you handle that, Manda. Might go off, you can't never tell."

The man frowned at the girls, heavy black brows drawing together.

"You can't land here. This part of the lake is private property."

"But——" began Carolyn.

"They ain't no buts about it. You can't land here, and when I say you can't, there ain't no buts about it. You clear out!"

He raised the shotgun in a suggestive gesture.

Realizing that nothing could be gained by continuing the argument, the girls backed away and soon lost sight of the dock in the all-enveloping mist.

"And that's that!" said Lota. "I begin to think Mr. Wellington Cox was right when he said it wasn't healthy for strangers up this way."

The Outdoor Girls were angry at the treatment they had received, but they were still more concerned with the problem of where and how they were to spend the night.

The heavy mist made exploration of the

shoreline difficult, almost impossible. In the end it was quite by luck that they discovered a break in the shoreline where it was possible to land the canoes without wrecking them.

Having drawn the *Puck* and the *Never-mind* out of the water, the girls stood and shivered on the bank, oppressed by the silence and loneliness of the place, unable to decide in which direction to look for shelter.

There was nothing for it but to go straight ahead and trust to luck that they would stumble upon something that would serve them as shelter for the night.

They proceeded cautiously, however, for the memory of the man and woman with the shotgun was still strong upon them. They had no desire to encounter the unsavory pair again.

"Got your compass, Stella?" Lota asked.

"Yes. We'll not get lost. If worst comes to worst, we can always find our way back to the canoes."

They kept close together for fear of becoming separated. As they went on, deeper and deeper into the woods, the mist turned into a drizzling rain.

"Now we are going to be drenched," said

Carolyn, turning up the collar of her jacket. "What an awful place!"

"If only we don't run into the brown mill! That's all I ask!" said Meg. "Somehow, I don't feel half as curious about it," she laughed ruefully, "as I did, say, yesterday morning."

"I guess none of us does," said Irene. "I think, if we were honest, we'd admit that it would have been better if we'd taken Wellington Cox's advice and stayed away from Tonk Lake."

"Oh, well, it might be worse," retorted Stella, her tone suddenly cheerful. "Isn't that some sort of building ahead of us in the woods?"

"The brown mill!" cried Lota, and they all stopped dead in their tracks.

It was Carolyn Cooper who gave a nervous little laugh.

"Nonsense! That isn't any mill. It's only a shack."

"And it looks deserted enough, in all conscience," said Stella.

"Let's hope it is," retorted Meg, still remembering the pair with the shotgun.

They approached silently, peering through the window of the shack before they tried the

door. That encounter at the dock had taught them caution.

The window pane was covered with cobwebs, and that fact, coupled with the gloom in the woods, made it impossible to see the interior of the shack clearly. As far as they could make out, however, the place was empty. In fact, it gave the impression of having been deserted for some time.

The girls tried the door and it yielded creakingly. Inch by inch they pushed it inwards until the interior of the cabin stood exposed to them.

The one room they could see was empty, no doubt of that. The Outdoor Girls pushed their way inside, thankful to be out of the now heavily falling rain.

The shack consisted of one room. It contained two bunks, each covered with a none-too-clean mattress. There was also a rusty stove, a table, a rickety chair, two soap boxes, a rusted old frying pan, and a tin of canned beans.

"Not so bad," said Irene, sticking her nose into everything and even rubbing the cobwebs from the window so that she could view the storm outside. "Now, with some duffel from the *Nevermind*——"

"We'd better not go back to the canoes," Stella decided. "It's getting dark and we might find it almost impossible to come upon this shack again."

"Better make the best of small blessings and stay here," Carolyn agreed.

"With one can of beans?" mourned Meg, whose appetite was always lusty.

"And no way of heating that," added Lota, whose appetite matched that of her twin.

"Count your blessings," said Irene severely. "Listen to that storm outside and be glad you have shelter overhead!"

In fact, the storm had begun in earnest. Wind howled dismally about the deserted shack. Rain tapped sharply against the window panes like some one impatient to get in.

Carolyn, stationed at one of the dirty windows, sighed dismally.

Stella stopped beside her and asked gently:

"Still thinking of Hal, Carolyn?"

"How can I think of any one else, Stella? I think of him all the time. It seems dreadful for us to be off here having a good time——"

"Is that what you call it?" asked Irene, pausing briefly in her tour of investigation.

Carolyn smiled reluctantly.

"Well, you know what I mean. If we aren't

enjoying ourselves at just this minute, we shall again. And all the time Hal is sitting in some musty old jail——"

"But he's out on bail, honey. Allen said so. Hal is no more in jail than you or I."

"Under the circumstances, jail would have no terrors for me," said Meg lugubriously. "At least the warden might feed us."

This brought a reluctant smile to Carolyn's sober face. The others giggled appreciatively.

"You said something there," observed Irene. "I'm going to scout about and see if I can't dig out more than this can of beans."

However, all Irene's scouting was unable to produce anything more in the line of foodstuffs. They did succeed in unearthing a can opener, however, which, as Stella remarked, was a mercy, for without that necessary tool they would have been denied even the can of beans.

Having pried open the rusty tin, they were faced by still another difficulty.

"How are we going to eat them?" asked Iota. "There isn't a plate or a spoon in the place."

"If you have never heard that ancient, but true saying, 'fingers were made before forks,' it's high time you did," said Meg.

"In other words," chuckled Irene, "dig in, and to the best digger go the most beans. Now then!"

In the act of showing her companions how it was done, Irene paused.

There was a sound at the door of the shack, an odd sound, as though some one had fallen against it and then slipped softly to the ground.

The girls stood as though hypnotized. They did not move, they did not stir. The door held their fascinated gaze.

The knob moved slowly. Carolyn thanked her stars that she had thought to shoot the heavy wooden bolt on the inside of it.

The sound of a woman's voice came weakly, moaningly:

"If there's annyone in there, let me in! If you've anny hope of Hivven yourselves, let me in!"

CHAPTER XXII

NORAH McCARTHY

THE Outdoor Girls exchanged glances alive with apprehension. There seemed little doubt that whoever was on the other side of the shack door was in the last stage of weakness and terror.

Yet, remembering the man and the woman with the shotgun and the mystery surrounding the old brown mill, they hesitated to answer that desperate call.

Could it be, they asked themselves, that this was a trick? Had this person been sent to lure them into the open for some sinister purpose which they could not comprehend?

Again came the moaning plaint from the other side of the door.

"For the love of Hivven, let me in! It's near dead I am! And the wretches is after me. If they do be catching me, it's kill me they will."

"We'll have to take a chance, girls. We

can't leave any poor creature outside on a night like this."

"And we left our revolvers down by the lake," cried Meg. "Wouldn't you know that's what we'd do just when we're most apt to need them?"

"Hush!" said Stella. "I'm going to open the door."

"Just a crack then," begged Irene. "Stand behind me, girls, so that we can throw ourselves against the door and shoot the bolt if we have to."

Carolyn and the Bronson twins ranged themselves close to Stella and Irene. The former cautiously slipped the bolt and opened the door just a crack.

On her knees, her hand still grasping the knob of the door, her hat awry, her clothes disheveled, was the most miserable-looking creature the Outdoor Girls had ever laid eyes upon.

She half fell into the room at the opening of the door. The girls seized her and dragged her inside, slamming the door to and shooting the bolt.

The miserable woman got to her feet, moaning. Carolyn pushed over a chair and she sank

into it, wringing her hands and babbling incoherently.

"Oh, the wretches! The dirty, heathen wretches! Beat me, will they? I'll show them! It's get even with them I will, if it's the last act of me life!"

The woman took off her sodden hat and flung it on the table.

The girls looked at her with a pitying curiosity. The woman was the most miserable object they had ever looked upon. Young, and evidently of Irish birth, she had a beaten, terrified look about her that caught at their hearts. She shivered in her sodden clothes and cast desperately apprehensive looks at door and windows.

"You are safe here," said Stella reassuringly. "The door is bolted and the windows are locked shut."

"Ah, it's plain you're not knowin' thim wretches," said the poor creature, trembling. "It's little they do be carin' for locked windows or doors. If they so much as guessed I was here, they'd be breakin' down the place, like as not."

This prospect was not particularly reassuring to the Outdoor Girls. They, too, cast

apprehensive glances toward the doors and windows.

"Won't you tell us who you are and who the people are that you're afraid of?" asked Stella. "We want to help you. Perhaps we can."

"Me name's Norah McCarthy, and a good Irish name it is. But help me you can't, except givin' me a night's shelter—and what's more ye'd best not be mixin' in that crooked work, not if ye be knowin' what's good for ye!"

By degrees the woman quieted so that she was able to give a more or less coherent account of what had happened to her.

" 'Twas in Deepdale I was before bein' hired for the place," she explained. " 'Twas the woman bespoke me soft and plissant like. The work would be aisy, she said, and the wages foine. So I was after takin' the place."

"What place?" prompted Lota.

"The place at the old brown mill."

The girls started and gasped.

"The old brown mill!" repeated Carolyn. "Have you been working there?"

"That I have." The woman shot an apprehensive glance doorwards. "And a fearful toime I've been havin'. They're heathens, the bunch of them."

"Who are?" asked Irene. She spoke eagerly. Were they about to learn something of the mystery surrounding the old brown mill at which Wellington Cox had hinted?

"Them at the mill," said Norah McCarthy. She shivered violently, as though the mere mention of the inhabitants of the old brown mill brought her terrors more vividly to mind. " 'Tis the Old Nick's place, that it is, and them that works there is the imps of Satan. I'll niver go back there. Niver!"

"You won't have to," said Stella soothingly. "Tell us what they do at the mill."

"They grind and grind and grind all night," said the woman darkly. "And it ain't meal they grind."

"Don't you know what they're up to?" Stella persisted.

"That I don't. 'Tis a secret place, and they told me if I was after goin' near it the imps themselves would get me."

She paused, looked about her in a terrified way, and, lowering her voice to a whisper, said:

"It was the divil that caught me—none else. I was beaten with ropes and tied in the round house. It's only the mercy of Hivven I was

able to get loose. May all the imps of Satan get me if I go near the place again!"

"They beat you?" asked Lota incredulously.

"Aye, that they did, till I could scarce stand."

"Was it because you tried to find out their secret?" asked Carolyn.

The woman shook her head.

"They thought I tried to find out, but I never did. I was too frightened of them and their threats. But last night I couldn't sleep, what with the noise of the grindin' and all. So I crept out of the livin' quarters and went down to the lake, thinkin' it would be cool-like down there. And thin I hears voices and I stops to listen."

The woman paused and the girls prompted her eagerly.

"What did you hear?"

"It was the voices of some men and from what they said I could tell they was loadin' boxes on to some boats down by the lake."

"Were they taking away the stuff they grind in the mill?" Meg asked eagerly.

"Maybe 'twas that," agreed Norah McCarthy. "However, I didn't stop to foind out.

I tried to get away without them hearin' me, but I made a noise goin' through the bushes and they caught up with me. It was after that that they beat me and toied me up."

"And that's all you know?" asked Irene.

"If I was to die to-morrow I'd say the same," returned Norah McCarthy.

The story of the woman, so far from enlightening the girls concerning the doings at the mill, only made the mystery darker.

If the desperate company at the brown mill were not honest millers—and the testimony of Norah McCarthy fairly disposed of that theory—then what were they?

"Do you think the fact of your escape will be noticed right away?" Irene asked of the shivering Norah McCarthy.

The woman looked about her nervously at the darkening squares of the windows. Her glance rested on the barred door.

"Well, since you be askin' me, I don't think they'll find out I'm gone till the mornin'. But you nivver can tell about them rascals. For all I know, they may be after me this minute."

Thereafter, the Outdoor Girls held a council. They were fearful lest the *Puck* and the *Nevermind* be discovered by some one from

the mill on the track of Norah McCarthy. If these, their one means of escape from the place, were taken by the enemy, then their plight would indeed be a desperate one.

On the other hand, it was altogether unlikely that the canoes would be found on such a night and in such a storm. They had already been dragged up among the bushes and tall grass where they would not be seen by any one not actually stumbling over them. To venture into the storm with the object of concealing them more thoroughly and perhaps rescuing the much-needed revolvers, might mean that they would lose themselves in the dark woods and so be worse off than they were at the moment.

"We'd better stay here till the morning," Meg advised. "After all, we have a locked door and bolted windows between us and trouble. Let's trust to our stars and by morning we can tell better what to do."

The Outdoor Girls decided to act on this advice and proceeded to make themselves and Norah McCarthy as comfortable as it was possible to do in the extremely uncomfortable shack.

The Irishwoman was nearly starved among other things, and the girls gave her almost

the entire can of beans, themselves going hungry to such beds as there were.

They slept fitfully, starting up again and again at some fancied noise at one of the windows or the door.

With the earliest dawn they were astir, thankful that the time had come for definite action.

The storm had nearly worn itself out. Rain still fell in a fine drizzle, but the east was brightening, giving hope of clear weather later in the day.

They decided to abandon the shack. They were helped to this decision by Norah McCarthy, who told them of another abandoned shack further back in the woods and somewhat nearer to the old brown mill.

"They say at the mill that it's haunted and no one goes there. We're safer there than here. Just now I'm more afraid of those people at the mill than I am of those from the other world."

Lota, looking from the window, cried suddenly:

"There's some one coming, girls! What shall we do?"

CHAPTER XXIII

IN HIDING

Lota Bronson's statement, "There's some one coming!" almost threw the Outdoor Girls into a panic. Norah McCarthy began to shiver violently and mumble prayers beneath her breath. For a moment it seemed as though discovery by the intruder was inevitable.

Then Stella gave her commands.

"Clear out!" she cried. "Clear out as quick as you can and hide in the woods till the man goes by!"

Breathlessly they tumbled from the house, taking Norah McCarthy with them. Lota had presence of mind enough to close the door after them.

Into the woods they scuttled, found a cluster of rocks and bushes, and ducked behind it.

They were not a moment too soon.

The man, an evil-faced, powerful-looking fellow, passed about the cabin, opened the door and looked within.

The girls held their breath for fear he would go inside and discover that the place had been recently occupied.

However, the man seemed satisfied that the place was unoccupied, slammed the door to, and went on his way. He passed close to the hiding girls and Nora McCarthy without discovering them. They could hear him muttering to himself as he went.

That danger over, they breathed more freely.

"It's evident they have missed their prisoner and are looking for her," said Stella. "What we do must be done quickly."

Norah McCarthy began to sob.

"If thim spalpeens catch me it's after killin' me they'll be."

The girls were convinced that the poor woman had reason enough for her terror. Yet it was difficult to decide what to do about her.

If they tried to put off in the *Puck* and the *Nevermind,* they would almost surely be seen by some one from the brown mill, and in that case they would undoubtedly be intercepted and Norah McCarthy, perhaps themselves, made prisoner.

There was only one thing to do. They must hide in the woods until the search for the

Irish woman was abandoned, or until dark, when they would try to escape.

They stole down to the lake where they found the *Puck* and the *Nevermind* lying exactly as they had left them. They took from the duffel bags their revolvers which they had packed in the event of just such an emergency.

They armed themselves with such foodstuffs from their store of supplies as they thought they would need for the day, then dragged the canoes further into the underbrush, covering them with sticks and leaves in the hope that they would escape detection.

"Now," said Stella to Norah McCarthy, "we are in your hands. Show us this shack you spoke of and we'll hide there until the search for you has died down."

The Irishwoman obeyed, trembling. It was evident that she was in abject terror of those at the brown mill. As they burrowed further into the woods, going stealthily and carefully so as to make as little noise as possible, Norah cowered at every cracking twig and once gave a smothered cry when Meg dislodged a stone and sent it rattling down the hill.

Although every step they took they were

in danger of discovery, the journey into the woods was accomplished without difficulty and they came to the dilapidated cabin without having met a person on the way.

The place was a sorry spectacle and the girls could understand easily enough how it had come by its sinister reputation.

The door had fallen from its hinges and lay before steps overgrown with slimy, unhealthy-looking moss. The windows, of which there were several, were cracked, the roof was caved in. The original color of the hut had been brown, but it had been discolored by time and weather until now it was almost black.

"Not much to look at," said Carolyn ruefully.

"It's shelter, anyway," said Stella. "Come ahead."

The shack was not less dreary from the inside. There was a stove and an open fireplace, but the stove was rusted with disuse and in the fireplace was the blackened ash from the last fire that had been made in it.

The room contained the usual kitchen furniture—a few chairs and a rickety table.

There were two other rooms to the shack. Each contained a sagging bed with a filthy

mattress and had evidently once been used as bedrooms. There was a lean-to hanging like a barnacle to the rear of the shack. The lean-to contained some kindling wood, some shelves, a can of kerosene nearly full, a few old cooking utensils, and a small oil stove.

"Not so bad," said Irene cheerfully. "Looks like a hot breakfast for us, anyway."

"That stream we passed looked as if it was just chock full of trout," Meg said longingly.

"Um-yum," said Lota, smacking her lips. "A few fresh fish sizzling in the pan would be my idea of starting the day right."

"Make them stop, somebody," begged Carolyn. "They're just trying to aggravate us!"

"Stop, girls!" laughed Stella, and added soberly: "No one would like fresh trout for breakfast better than I. But something tells me we shall do no fishing to-day."

Nor was it possible for Stella to guess when she made this pronouncement that before the day was over she and her fellow Outdoor Girls would be engaged in the thrilling enterprise of hooking a much larger fish than any inhabiting an inland stream!

They made breakfast, for they were aware by that time of being fairly famished for

food, while one of the girls kept constant watch at the door of the shack.

After an ample breakfast—to which Norah McCarthy did full justice despite her fear of recapture—the girls felt better. In fact, they felt exceedingly strong and confident, quite able to cope with any set of circumstances that might develop during the day.

In the beginning their one thought had been to escape as soon as possible from the disturbing neighborhood of the brown mill. Now, in the light of their changed mood, a natural curiosity concerning the mysterious doings at the brown mill asserted itself.

"I'd like to know what those people are up to," was the way Irene Moore put it.

"And I sure would like to get even with that rawboned woman who waved the shotgun at us," Meg said.

"If we've got to stick about here all day, we might as well make use of our time and try to find out what the scoundrels are up to," added Lota.

Carolyn looked at the leader of the Outdoor Girls, who, in her turn, was staring thoughtfully through the broken glass of the window.

"What say, Stella? I must admit I feel the

first faint stirrings of curiosity myself—not so faint, either, when you come to think of it. Suppose we'd better chance it?"

Stella's glance traveled about the circle of questioning faces. Slowly she smiled.

"I wouldn't mind seeing what the brown mill looks like," she admitted.

"Hooray!" cried Irene, starting to her feet. "Let's go."

The matter, however, was not as simple as that. Norah McCarthy must first be won over to their plan, and this proved to be a difficult task.

Norah refused to have anything further to do with the old brown mill or the people in it, shaking her head vehemently whenever the subject was mentioned.

At last when the girls thought they had exhausted every argument, they hit upon one that had an effect.

"If the people at the mill are up to anything illegal, which certainly seems probable, perhaps we can discover something about them that we shall be able to report to the police," Carolyn pointed out. "Then you will have your revenge, Norah McCarthy, upon these people who have treated you so badly. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Norah flared up at this challenge. Her eyes sparkled and she shook her fist in the direction of the old brown mill.

"If I could see them all in jail, it's happy I'd be—and for the first time since I took service with that awful woman."

"You can help by showing us the way to the mill," said Irene artfully.

Norah McCarthy agreed to this at last, reluctantly and with the provision that she would go nowhere near the mill herself.

"I wouldn't, not if you was to offer me a million dollars in gold," said she.

The girls returned that she might have her way about that. They wanted to be shown the old brown mill, that was all.

So they set out in mid-morning, with the sun high in the heavens and a lovely smell of moist earth in the air. They went with caution, for they were of no mind to have their adventure spoiled by a premature capture.

Norah led them to the top of a low promontory from which they had a good view of the lake. At some distance through the trees, looming dark and sinister even in the brilliant sunshine of mid-morning, was the outline of a tall, narrow building. Attached to

it were two smaller structures which looked as though they were recent additions.

The old brown mill!

Norah McCarthy quivered and quaked and hid herself behind a clump of rocks and shrubbery.

"It's the home of the Old Nick himself," she muttered. "You'd best not be goin' any closer, I'm tellin' ye!"

Suddenly Meg said, in a soft, excited whisper:

"Look, girls! Look down there at the lake!"

CHAPTER XXIV

HOOKING A BIG FISH

A FLATBOAT appeared from the direction of the mill, being driven down the lake. The boat was loaded with boxes.

"The stuff they grind at the mill," said Meg.

Stella nodded.

"If we knew what was in those boxes, we should probably know the secret of the mill," she said.

They were aware of Norah McCarthy close beside them, peering down at the lake.

"'Tis Gus, the boatman," she said in a shaking voice. "'Tis him I've seen ag'in and ag'in makin' off with his boatload o' boxes. May the banshee get him and all his ilk," she added ferociously.

The Outdoor Girls watched the flatboat until it was out of sight; then Irene suggested that they try to get closer to the brown mill.

"It seems to me time some one did some investigating," she whispered.

"Not me," said Norah McCarthy hastily. "I'll go no further—not for anybody."

"You stay here, Norah," Stella directed. "We won't be gone long."

"If those rascals do be catchin' ye, ye'll probably nivver be comin' back," said Norah lugubriously.

"That sounds cheerful," said Lota, with a nervous giggle.

"No one can say we haven't been warned what to expect," added Meg grimly.

As the Outdoor Girls approached closer to the brown mill, their caution increased. Norah McCarthy had infected them with her fear of the place. In truth, the gaunt and dreary buildings looked a fit habitation for the Old Nick and his minions.

As they came closer they were aware of a low humming noise, like the steady drone of millions of bees. So far, there had been no indication of human habitation. There was no movement outside the mill, only that steady hum within.

Having almost reached the clearing, they paused to hold whispered counsel before venturing out into the open.

"As soon as we step out into the clearing

we shall almost surely be seen by some one in the mill," said Stella, hesitating.

"On the other hand, it seems too bad to have come so far and not to go on a little farther," Meg contended.

Irene was about to enter the argument when she was shocked into forgetting what she was about to say. She had missed something. The humming noise had stopped.

Almost immediately, several men stepped from the side door of the mill.

The group comprised a handful of villainous-looking ruffians. Several were bearded and had long arms and stooped shoulders like gorillas. The others, though beardless, were scarcely less unpleasant to look upon. The girls could see, even at that distance from the mill, that the features of the men were large and coarse, their gestures rough and uncouth.

The men stood for a while in conversation. They appeared to be arguing about something, using loud words and rough gestures. Finally, all but one of them broke away and turned in the direction of the lake.

The one man lingered. He was staring steadily at the group of trees behind which crouched the Outdoor Girls. Was he suspicious? Could he have seen them?

The girls did not move. They scarcely dared breathe. The others looked at Stella anxiously to see what she would recommend in this emergency. Stella motioned to them to be absolutely still.

"He may not have seen us," the gesture said. "He may be thinking of something entirely different. Let us wait and find out."

They were not long in finding out. The man had been smoking a pipe. He now deliberately knocked out the contents of the pipe against the trunk of a tree, stuck both hands into his pockets, pipe and all, and took a few slow steps in their direction.

"He is coming this way!" cried Carolyn, in a panic. "Stella, what shall we do? What shall we do?"

"Run!" directed Stella in a fierce whisper. "Be as quick as you can and hide somewhere. We have only a minute!"

Off the girls scuttled, hunting desperately for a hiding place. Their presence of mind did not desert them. They had sense enough to keep close together and to make as little noise as possible.

As luck would have it, they found a fairly good hiding place almost at once. This was a hole, dug beneath a large flat rock and ex-

tending for some distance under it. Trained as they were in the art of woodcraft, the Outdoor Girls were quick to see and seize upon the possibilities of this crude, earthy cavern. They burrowed beneath the rock, squeezing themselves into as little space as possible.

Stella Sibley kept her lookout behind a tree until the last moment, then forced herself into the infinitesimal portion of space still remaining beneath the rock.

"Like nice fat sardines in a can," came in a whisper from Irene.

"Keep quiet!" Stella whispered back fiercely. "He—he's almost here."

There was a broken branch of a tree lying on the ground within reach of Stella's hand. She drew this toward her, thereby partially concealing the fact that there was a hole beneath the rock. With fingers that trembled in their haste, she scraped together leaves and broken twigs to further conceal their hiding place. She stopped suddenly and lay still, hissing a warning to the other girls.

There was the sound of footsteps in the woods, footsteps that came closer with every breathless moment.

Peering fearfully through the leafy screen,

Stella Sibley could see the author of the footsteps. She could see him quite clearly. In another moment, perhaps, he would see her. Then what?

She held her breath. From the tense silence that pervaded the hiding place beneath the rock, she knew that the other girls were listening too, waiting, hoping——

She had this advantage over her companions, thought Stella, that she could see what was going on. But was this an advantage? When all was said and done, she doubted it.

The man turned around and Stella caught her breath. He was coming straight for their hiding place! He had seen them!

She saw the feet in their heavy boots approaching the rock. They were big feet and they crushed the underbrush ruthlessly.

Stella heard a short, stifled sigh from one of the girls behind her. The girls must be quiet! This fellow would hear them!

On he came, a steady tramp, tramp, tramp. He was coming straight to their hiding place! A moment more, and he would reach out his hand, tear away the frail screen of leaves and branches! She held her breath. Her heart pounded.

Then the feet paused in their ruthless for-

ward march. They turned. There was no further sound. Peering forth cautiously, Stella saw that their owner had seated himself on a rock. He appeared to be very comfortable. He pulled out his pipe and, in the most leisurely manner imaginable, lighted it and took a few experimental puffs.

There he sat for what seemed ages to the half-stifled, frightened girls.

The man, thought Stella, was glued to the spot. He would never move!

A dozen unpleasant speculations raced through her mind. Suppose this man knew of their absurd position, wedged in beneath the overhang of rock? Suppose he was deliberately tormenting them, holding them in their cramped position until some involuntary sound or movement on their part should force them to reveal their hiding place?

That involuntary sound or movement was sure to come, Stella knew. The girls could not forever remain in that cramped position, motionless, scarcely breathing. Some one would groan or giggle or sigh, and then discovery would follow.

Would that horrible man never move? Was he going to sit on that rock for all the rest of his natural life?

Stella heard a faint sound from behind her. She held her breath. Had the man heard it, too?

Evidently not. He sat as quiet as ever, stolidly puffing away at his pipe.

In her ear some one whispered:

"Can't you roll out, Stella? We're getting smothered in here!"

Stella tried to indicate, by an agonized silence, that she could not roll out, that no one was to speak, that no one was even to breathe!

Oh, this was too much, too awful for human endurance! If that fellow continued to sit on the rock puffing away at his stupid pipe for another moment, she, Stella, would scream! She would jump to her feet and knock the horrible pipe out of his hand! She would do anything to break the silence, to relax the strained tension of nerves and muscles!

Behind her she heard a faint, impatient rustling. One of the girls was getting restless. But she must be still—she must!

Another awful thought occurred to Stella. Suppose one of the girls should smother in that stifling hole! Suppose, when the time came for rolling out, one of the girls was unable to roll! Totally improbable, of course,

but then, most anything might happen in that nightmarish situation.

Stella concentrated her thoughts on that man stupidly puffing away at his pipe. She would think him into moving! She would will him to move!

The man's narrowed gaze turned slowly in her direction and Stella was terrified by another thought. She had read somewhere that one can force another person to look at him by merely staring steadily at him. Was this what she had done by her silly desire to will him into moving? She would never forgive herself! If her companions were delivered into the hands of those mysterious fiends at the brown mill, then she, Stella, would have only herself to thank. Was she not the leader of the Outdoor Girls, pledged to help them in all emergencies? Now she had failed them, had, in a moment of peril, given them away!

The man was getting to his feet. The time had come now! They would be discovered! They would be dragged away, prisoners, to the brown mill, to what awful fate Stella could only guess!

The man was knocking out his pipe against the rock. He seemed always in the act of

knocking out his pipe, Stella thought resentfully. Couldn't he leave the smelly thing alone?

The man took a step or two toward them. The dreaded moment had come!

Stella closed her eyes and opened them again to see—the feet retreating! She blinked her eyes and looked again. It was incredible but true. The man was actually going away!

He paused for a moment and looked about him curiously. He appeared to be listening intently. Stella heard him mutter:

"Sure thought I seen something behind those trees. Must have been mistaken though. There ain't nothing here."

The fellow trudged off into the underbrush. The trees swallowed him up. Only the rank smell of his pipe remained to remind the girls of his sinister presence.

Stella waited for some seconds after the tramp, tramp of the man's footsteps had died away, then cautiously pushed aside the leafy screen that had served her to such good purpose and rolled cautiously into the open.

Her comrades followed one by one. They were disheveled. Damp earth clung to their clothes and faces. Otherwise, they were unhurt.

"A close shave, I'll say," Meg whispered. "Ugh, I've mud all over me! I believe I've even swallowed some!"

"Sh!" cautioned Stella. "Let's follow that fellow. We may discover something to our advantage."

The Outdoor Girls cautiously retraced their steps until the brown mill once more came in view. Again the side door opened and several men stepped into the clearing.

The girls shrank back among the trees, hearts pounding. Was their presence discovered? Had the men been sent to look for them?

They breathed again when the men went on around the side of the mill without so much as a glance toward the spot where the Outdoor Girls crouched in hiding among the trees.

"Maybe they've gone to lunch," Carolyn suggested.

The suggestion put an interesting thought in Lota's mind.

"Then this is probably the working end of the mill. If the men have gone to lunch, it may have been left unguarded temporarily. If we don't do our investigating now, we shall probably never have another chance as good!"

The suggestion seized upon the girls' imaginations.

"They may have left a man on guard, you know," Stella warned her comrades.

"We shall have to take our chances of that," Meg urged impatiently.

"All right, we'll try it, sink or swim, do or die," said Stella. "Come on, girls, and may *luck* be with us!"

For some time luck was very much with them.

They left the shelter of the trees and scurried across the clearing, expecting each moment to be hailed roughly by some one from the mill. Nothing of the sort happened, and they reached the shelter of the mill wall without, apparently, having been seen by any one.

Near to where they stood was an open window. Resolved to press their good fortune hard for as long as it lasted, Stella nodded to the girls and crept noiselessly to this aperture.

She hesitated before looking into the room. Blood pounded in her ears. She felt breathless with excitement. Their luck, she felt, was too good to last. What was she about to see within that room?

A touch on her arm from Meg, close behind

her, prodded Stella to action. Cautiously, she peered about the casing of the window. She turned back to the girls, her eyes shining.

"No one there," she whispered. "I'm going in."

With the ease born of many such experiences, Stella put a leg over the window sill and eased herself into the room. One by one, as noiselessly as ghosts, the girls followed.

The place was long and narrow and filled with strange-looking machinery. The girls saw at once that it was a workshop.

On a narrow table, stretching almost the length of the room, were heaps of shining metal.

The girls were mystified and moved closer to the table, the better to examine those shining strips.

Suddenly Carolyn gave a startled gasp and motioned the girls closer.

There were printed words indented in the metal at regular intervals. Reading this, Carolyn knew that she had stumbled upon the key to the mystery of the old brown mill.

"Read it!" she cried to the wondering girls.

In a cautiously lowered voice, Irene read:

" 'Imperial Radoflex Safety Razor Corporation.' Why, girls, I believe—why, of

course—this is where they are manufacturing all those bogus razor blades!"

The girls were so completely absorbed in the wonder of this marvelous discovery that for the moment they forgot their own peril.

A clumping of heavy footsteps in the corridor outside the workroom recalled them to their senses and to a realization of their great danger.

"Hurry!" cried Stella wildly. "Run!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE REWARD

As THE Outdoor Girls darted like frightened rabbits across the room, the knob of the door began to turn. They heard a man's voice, then another answering, and they waited for no more. They tumbled from the window, reckless of turned ankles or scraped shins, and stood pressed against the wall trying to suppress their hurried breathing while they listened for sounds from the room within.

Discovery and capture seemed almost certain. If the man had not actually seen them, he must have heard sounds of their hurried departure. He would surely put his head out the window, in which case he could scarcely fail to see them crouched there against the wall as though they were trying to make themselves a part of it.

However, as the seconds passed and there was no sign of pursuit either from within

or without the room, the girls began to take heart.

Stella motioned to the others to follow her, and they crept along the rear wall of the mill, meaning, when they reached the end of it, to dart across the open space and seek shelter in the trees.

The throbbing of their hearts made a loud drumming in their ears, a drumming which they felt must warn all within the mill that spies were abroad and that the guilty secret within the long workroom had been discovered.

Once they heard a fancied sound and stood still, crouching against the wall. For several seconds no one moved. Every ear was strained in listening.

Deep within the mill could be heard the sound of voices, harsh voices raised in angry altercation. A door slammed and the voices ceased. Stella beckoned and they began to creep along the wall again, expecting discovery with every second.

However, they reached the end of the wall without mishap, darted across the cleared space, and were swallowed up by the friendly trees.

As they turned to look back at the mill,

they saw a head thrust through the window from which they had escaped and shuddered to think by what fraction of a second they had eluded detection.

"Don't talk and make as much speed as possible back to the place where we left Norah McCarthy."

These instructions from Stella the other girls were only too willing to follow. The mill had assumed gigantic proportions in their imaginations as a place of evil where any horrible thing might take place.

They found Norah McCarthy crouched behind the clump of shrubbery and shivering with apprehension. She stared at the girls upon their arrival as though they were a company of ghosts.

"Sure, and it's your spirits I do be seein'," she cried. "I've nivver been expectin' to see yez ag'in in the flesh."

"Sh!" commanded Stella imperatively. "If you expect to leave this place alive, follow us, Norah McCarthy! And—and make it snappy!"

Norah obeyed, trembling and shivering and muttering prayers to the saints as she stumbled along.

The Outdoor Girls had little doubt as to

where their leader was taking them. They were not surprised when she led them to the little cove where they had beached and hidden their canoes the day before.

"Be quick!" she ordered. "Everything depends on our getting away from here without being discovered."

As the girls pushed and tugged at the *Puck* and the *Nevermind,* they found that their teeth were chattering—not with fear, they assured themselves, but with excitement. Their ears were constantly strained for sounds from the woods. They worked with feverish impatience that only delayed their departure.

After what seemed hours of exhausting effort the *Puck* was safely launched.

"You will have to take one of the duffel bags," Stella said hurriedly. "We'll take Norah in the *Nevermind.* There! Got a good grip on it?"

"Fine! In with you, duffel bag!"

"Now push off," Stella directed. "Get away as fast as you can and make for the nearest house that looks as if it might have a telephone."

"How about you?"

"We'll follow directly. Put off now. Hurry."

Carolyn, Meg, and Lota made no further protest, but scrambled into the *Puck*.

"Meg, you paddle!" ordered Carolyn.

Now they were off, with a sensation of mingled elation and fear. They dipped their paddles in the water and pushed lustily, cheered by the widening gap between the *Puck* and shore.

Stella and Irene were having more difficulty with the *Nevermind*—or rather, with Norah McCarthy.

The Irishwoman did not like the canoe and at first flatly refused to enter it. Only the threat of being left behind on that rascal-ridden shore forced her to set foot in the "ornery contraption."

After several false starts and many smothered shrieks of protest, Stella and Irene finally urged their unwilling passenger aboard and pushed out into the open water.

They had put only a short distance between them and shore when a hoarse shout set their nerves tingling.

"Hey, you! Come back here or I'll shoot!"

On the bank stood the man who had accosted the Outdoor Girls the day before when they had tried to land at the dock. He carried in his hand a shotgun, probably the identical

one with which he and the gaunt woman had threatened them.

Norah McCarthy began to cry and wail and babble incoherently.

"Stop that noise, do!" cried Irene sharply. "What's the next move?" she asked of Stella.

"Paddle!" commanded Stella. "Paddle as though your life depended upon it. Perhaps it does," she added grimly.

"Come back here!" shouted the voice from the shore.

The command was immediately followed by a shower of shot.

Norah screamed and cowered lower in the canoe.

"For the love of Hivven, turn back!" she wailed. "It's kilt entoirely we'll be!"

"Faster, Irene," gasped Stella. "Faster! Make for the other side of the lake," she added, as the man with the gun began running along the shore.

They paddled madly. The *Nevermind* leaped ahead, gallant craft that she was, rapidly widening the gap between her and her pursuer.

There was another shout, another shower of shot that fell well short of the canoe. The next moment the *Nevermind* rounded a bend

in the lake and the man with the shotgun was lost to view.

"We're safe for the minute," Irene called over her shoulder.

"For the minute, yes, until that fellow gives the alarm at the old brown mill. Then they may set out after us in one of their own boats."

Irene scoffed.

"Let 'em try to catch us," she challenged.

They came upon the *Puck* some distance ahead, pulled up beside the bank and waiting for them.

"We've found a way around the falls," Carolyn announced.

"Show us," commanded Stella. "And be quick, Carolyn. What we need most now is speed!"

They encircled the falls, threading their way through a shallow stream studded with sharp rocks, a side-pocket of water that had entirely escaped their notice on their madcap passage before.

They came without warning upon a small cottage, snuggled cozily among the trees. It was a pleasant-looking place and totally out of keeping with the type of abode they had found on the opposite shores of the lake.

"They may have a telephone," said Stella. "Let's take a chance."

To the great delight of the girls, they found that the cottage did indeed possess a telephone. With the consent of the tenant, a talkative old gentleman who had rented the cottage for the summer and had only his aged housekeeper for company, the girls called the nearest headquarters of the local police.

Stella, as spokesman, told her story as briefly as possible, adding information as to the location of the cottage from which she was phoning. She hung up the receiver and turned eagerly to the other girls.

"I got the sheriff. He's coming right away with a whole squad of police."

"By water?"

"No, overland. They'll cross the bridge farther up the lake where it narrows before joining the next lake in the chain. Girls, we are going to be in on the finish of this thing! Isn't it marvelous?"

Carolyn Cooper, unable to sit still, paced up and down the small living room of the cottage. Her hands were thrust deep in her sweater pockets, her face flushed, her eyes almost feverishly bright.

"Girls, if the old brown mill is actually

the place where they have been manufacturing those bogus razor blades and we have those scoundrels arrested, then that should help clear Hal of suspicion, shouldn't it?"

"Should clear him altogether," said Meg. She also paced the room restlessly, stopping now and then to look from a window or listen for the sound of an approaching motor.

"The police will get hold of Levine and Robinson and make them confess," cried Irene. She rumpled her hair joyfully and grinned at her companions. "Girls, this is the most glorious thing that ever happened to us."

"How about the five thousand?" asked Stella quietly.

Her companions stared at her, nonplussed.

"What five thousand?"

"The five thousand dollars reward for the discovery of the plant where the bogus blades are made? We should get that."

The other girls stared at Stella for a long moment, then such a shout went up as nearly lifted the roof from the cottage.

"Whoopee!" yelled Lota, doing a wild dance in the middle of the room. "What an ending to our canoe trip!"

"Hush!" cried Stella suddenly. "I hear the sound of an automobile!"

The Outdoor Girls stampeded from the house, leaving Norah McCarthy in care of the housekeeper, and found two automobiles drawn up in the wagon road back of the cottage. One of these was crammed to the doors with men in uniform. The girls learned afterwards that these men had been rushed at express train speed from a near-by town. The other car held the sheriff and his assistant.

The sheriff questioned the girls briefly, then invited them into his car.

"You show us the way to this here old brown mill and we'll round up these scoundrels in jig-time," said the sheriff grimly. "It'll be a fine scoop if we bring 'em in. The whole country's been talkin' about it. Hop in, young ladies. We can't get there too soon!"

The wagon road became rougher and more overgrown with brushwood as they proceeded and finally had to be abandoned altogether. The party made the rest of the distance on foot.

The Outdoor Girls stopped suddenly and pointed through the trees.

"There's the old brown mill," Carolyn said, in a voice scarcely above a whisper. "Oh,

look!" she added excitedly. "They are taking things down to the water. The lake's full of flatboats!"

"Tryin' to give us the slip," said the sheriff grimly. "Come on, boys, we'll get 'em!"

The men in uniform advanced in a quick trot toward the old brown mill.

The rest was a wild mêlée of fighting men, revolver shots, shouting men, screaming women. The Outdoor Girls closed in upon the fray, unmindful of the danger to themselves, fascinated by the bitter, quickly terminated battle.

The men who had manned the old brown mill were a desperate lot and fought hard for a few moments. The law conquered, however, as it always conquers in the end, and they were soon rounded up, a sullen, bitter group of men and one woman, the woman of the shotgun, and herded in the narrow space between the old brown mill and the lake front.

The officers were handcuffing the lot when Stella, hovering on the outskirts of the grim crowd, saw something that caused her to call out sharply:

"Some one's trying to get away! Come on, girls!"

She led the chase into the woods at the rear of the mill. The girls soon came upon their quarry, a fat lumbering hulk of a woman, panting beneath the strain of unusual exertion.

The woman paused as the girls surrounded her. She stared at them sullenly.

"What do you want?" she snapped.

For the first time Stella gained a full view of the woman's face.

"Mrs. Daisy Renton!" she gasped, then chuckled hysterically. "Goodness! Who would ever have thought of meeting you here?"

"What are you going to do with me?" panted the woman, her breathing still labored. "You'd best let me go. The police have nothing to do with me."

She pressed forward, as though about to push Stella from her path. The girl stepped back a pace or two and drew from the hip pocket of her knickers a squat, ugly little weapon.

"Maybe the police have nothing to say to you, Mrs. Daisy Renton," she said. "Then again, maybe they have! At least I think I'll make sure by handing you over to them. Now, Mrs. Renton, march!"

It may be said that Mrs. Daisy Renton

was received with open arms by the police and promptly handcuffed to her husband, that inventor Renton of whom the Outdoor Girls had already heard and who, it seemed, was the moving force in the bogus razor blade swindle. Levine and Robinson were among the group of sullen, handcuffed scoundrels, but they were largely tools to the hand of the master conspirator, Eli Renton.

"This fellow Renton has put across the biggest swindle that's ever been worked on this country," said the sheriff, putting down names in his notebook. "He had the police all over the country fooled, and chances are he'd have kept 'em fooled a right smart time longer, hadn't it been for you girls. You're bright, all right—and lucky."

"I'll say they're lucky," spoke up one of the men in uniform. "They get the five thousand dollar reward, don't they, Chief?"

"I'll say they do." The sheriff's small, good-humored eyes twinkled at the girls. "And I'll say they deserve it. This is the biggest scoop our office has made in many a day and I'm darned grateful to 'em—beggin' your pardon, young ladies, but this here situation seems to call for strong language. Now there, prisoners! Forward march!"

Off they went, leaving the Outdoor Girls to the execution of a wild, impromptu dance in the deserted space before the old brown mill.

"Whoopee!" cried Irene. "Five thousand dollars! Let's go back to Deepdale, girls, and throw a party!"

"We will," said Stella. "And it will be a party that will make Deepdale sit up and take notice!"

Lights gleamed within the Sibley house. Rugs were thrown back, floors gleamed with much waxing and the friction of many dancing feet. The "big party" was at its height.

Stella, at the piano, banged out a merry tune, Irene danced a wild Highland fling, while Meg and Lota "made harmony" with their harmonicas. Clapping hands kept time to Irene's flying feet.

Somewhat apart from the hilarity Carolyn Cooper and Hal Duckworth talked in lowered tones.

"It's all right, Carolyn," the young fellow said exultantly. "Allen has fixed everything for me. He had nearly quashed the case against me, anyway. Then when you girls

came along with information about the old brown mill, and Levine and Robinson and that fellow Renton were dragged into court —well, the charge against me simply faded and died a natural death."

"Then you're free?" asked Carolyn eagerly.

"Free as air!" said Hal.

The sounds of revelry at the piano stopped. Some one turned on the radio and Carolyn jumped to her feet.

"Let's dance, Hal! I never was so happy in my life!"

Meanwhile, Clem Field had drawn Irene Moore to the front porch for a breath of fresh air and to rest after her exertions. The girl was bright-eyed, flushed from her dance. She eyed the lad provocatively.

"Well, Clem, we ran into considerable fun after we left you and Mrs. Field at Tumble Inn."

"Some folks have all the luck," Clem replied. "Aunt Jane ran me ragged with her cross-word puzzles. Have you collected that five thousand reward yet?" he asked abruptly.

Irene nodded vigorously.

"I'll say we have. We wanted to split even with Norah McCarthy, but she wouldn't have

it. She said it was no doing of hers. 'She'd nivver have gone near that awful place ag'in, that she wouldn't, not if her life depinded on it.' We made her take five hundred of the reward, though, and the poor thing acted as though she had come into a fortune."

Stella Sibley looked from the doorway, then came to perch upon the railing near Clem and Irene.

"I've just found out about that inventor, Mrs. Daisy Renton's husband, you know. Dick Blossom was just telling us that everything came out in court to-day. It seems that this Renton used to work for the Imperial Radoflex Safety Razor Corporation. He got fired from there and in revenge started this rival plant for the manufacture of bogus blades. He made a lot of money, but, like most crooks, he hadn't sense enough to make off with the spoils while the going was good. All right, Dick—I'm coming!"

From the lighted doorway Stella turned a laughing face to Irene and Clem.

"Those wretched Bronson girls! They refuse to dance with Dick unless he can call them by name. I'll have to give him a tip and save his life. The twins will be the death of him yet!"

As Irene started to her feet, laughing, Clem put a detaining hand on her arm.

"Can't we take a walk—or perhaps go out for a paddle in the *Puck* or *Nevermind?*" he pleaded. "It's far too hot to dance."

Irene hesitated for a moment, then shook her head teasingly.

"No. I can see by your face that you're going to be serious. We've had such a marvelous trip with such a glorious ending that I can't be serious to-night."

"Some other time?"

"Perhaps, but just now I want to dance. Will you dance with me, Clem?"

"Will I!" he cried, and followed her into the house.

THE END